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ELLERY QUEEN

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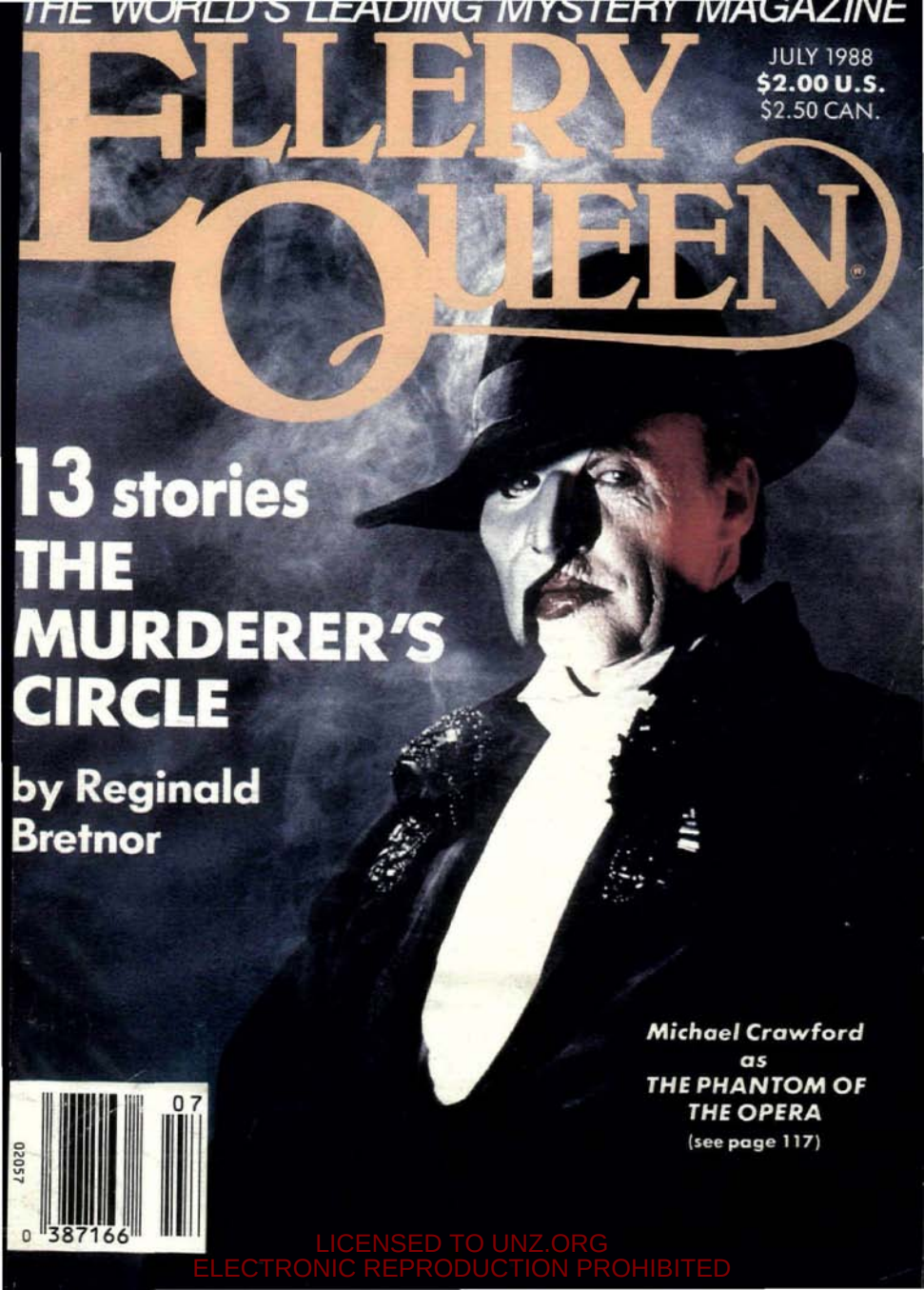
13 stories

THE MURDERER'S CIRCLE

by Reginald Bretnor



Michael Crawford as THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

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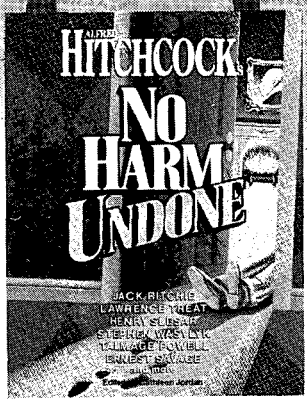

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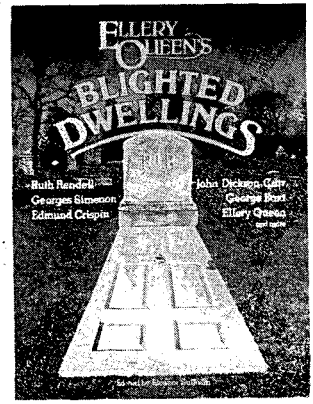

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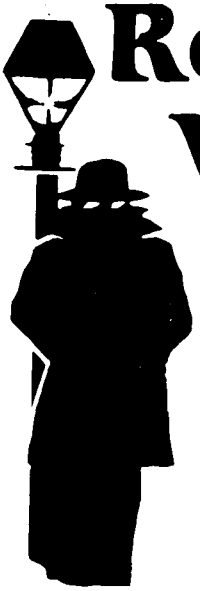

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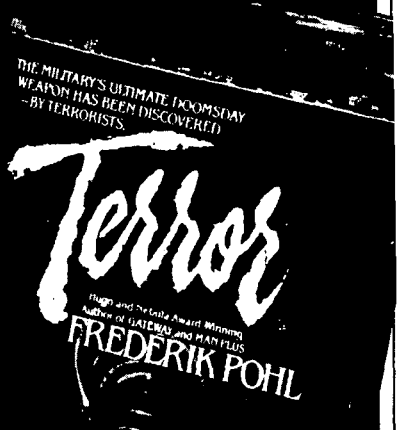
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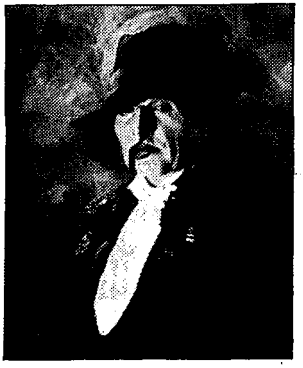

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as
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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

REGINALD BRETNOR

"Did you know I'm starting a new novel?" the delicious Jennifer Ouseley said. "It's about three or four murders at a sort of super house-party at a ski lodge near Aspen—that's in your state of Colorado, isn't it?"

Lasher replied that indeed it was—he knew the area well, he'd skied there many times. The Murderers' Circle, he thought. Don't these Brits ever suspect how far off the beam they are with their pretty little house-party setups? And now she wants to inflict that sort of garbage on Colorado . . .

THE MURDERERS' CIRCLE

by REGINALD BRETNOR

The invitation came as almost a complete surprise to Bryce Lasher, not because he didn't think he deserved it—he knew he did—but because, after making his abrasive reputation as a mystery critic by denigrating the traditional British detective novel and excoriating its writers, he had expected nothing but enmity on his arrival in London. And for nine days, that was exactly what he had experienced—that and, of course, often being snubbed completely, which was even more gratifying.

His publisher, who had made money out of the UK and Commonwealth rights to his three ruthless, overly explicit novels (termed mysteries only because no one could deny they were full of murders), had at first offered him consolation. "Don't worry, laddie," he'd said, "they're just jealous of your sales in Liverpool." Then he had realized that no consolation was necessary.

But even Saunders Egan, the company's editor-in-chief, a neat, military little man who had negotiated his very favorable contracts,

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though he was invariably polite, invariably solicitous, could not quite conceal his own suppressed antagonism. He did his duty, arranging autographing parties and bashes for fellow writers, critics, and reviewers (which were attended mostly by those who needed the free drinks) and even two speaking engagements, one of them at some sort of police training school where his audience appeared rather puzzled. When the critics and reviewers labeled him abusive, unintelligent, and semi-literate, Egan actually seemed to delight in handing him the clippings. Therefore, Lasher was astonished when Egan himself extended the invitation.

The business day had almost ended. Lasher had happily signed a satisfying contract for a fourth novel not yet written, and they had had a drink to cement the deal. He had actually risen to take off when Egan put a friendly arm around his shoulders and said, as though it were a sudden inspiration, "Bryce—you don't mind if I call you Bryce, do you?—do you have anything planned for this evening?"

Lasher had promised himself to spend the evening prowling Soho, where he suspected that his personal decor, patterned after the most expensive male ads in *Vanity Fair*, would bring him a variety of interesting adventures, but he quickly decided that it would keep. Well, well! he thought. Are they starting to come around? Or are they going to try to softsoap me into laying off? He laughed to himself. If they thought they'd stop him that way, they'd better have another think coming.

"I guess I don't," he answered. "What's up?"

"Well, I don't know if this'll interest you," said Egan, "but a small group of us meet about once a month and have dinner. Sometimes we have a speaker, but sometimes we just talk things over. Some of us are authors—there's Dame Euridice Claythorpe, for example—"

Woof! thought Lasher. Dame Euridice, with more than a hundred and thirty novels to her credit, was the unchallenged *doyenne* of country house-party mysteries. Much of what he had said about her work would, in a stricter age, have been considered absolutely libelous.

"She and who else?"

"Oh, there will be other writers, and a critic or two, and Commissioner Thwaites-Horton—you know, he runs Scotland Yard. Some of us are into the book end, others are aficionados—really avid ones, too. But Jennifer Ouseley'll be here any minute now. She's

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driving right down, so you might like to ride with her. She can fill you in on the others."

Jennifer Ouseley had come to be regarded as Dame Euridice's foremost amanuensis and natural successor, and the comments Lasher had made on her work had been tempered only by his realization that of all mystery writers she was without doubt the most desirable, at least physically. Not only had she been featured in the tabloids caparisoned only in an infinitesimal French bikini, but thousands of British housewives daydreamed of her reputedly tempestuous love affairs. She had black hair, full red lips, and a Gypsy's eyes. The idea of riding down there with her—wherever *there* might be—made Lasher surreptitiously lick his lips.

"And you won't have to bother to dress," Egan went on. "We're very informal—a tight little group, all very close friends, quite democratic really. After all, Peter Splain was a Yarmouth fishing-smack captain for years before he took up writing, and Braxton Bellingham—remember, those very technical mysteries?—is scarcely a public-school man, even if he is one of our foremost authorities on water snails. Then there's our host for the evening, dear old Alf Hobble—a real diamond in the rough and rich as Croesus. But hold on, here's Jennifer now—"

The door had opened, and there she was. Her eyes swept over Lasher, doing all sorts of things to his glands. She smiled. "And who have we here, Sandy?" she asked.

"My dear," said Egan, "this is Bryce Lasher, of whom you've certainly heard."

Licking his chops, and not surreptitiously, Lasher wondered momentarily about how she'd react. He needn't have. Her smile embraced him.

"Of *course!*" She laughed softly. "Why, what *fun!*"

"I told Bryce he could ride down with you," said Egan. "I was sure you wouldn't mind."

She laughed again. "Not if he doesn't."

Lasher indicated he didn't mind a bit.

"Well, let's get started, then," she said, taking his arm. "We have to get through all the traffic, and then it's a good twenty miles. You'll want to get there in time for cocktails and have a chance to meet everybody."

Egan saw them to her car, a Daimler Sovereign, and she swept expertly out into the traffic.

"Where are we headed?" Lasher asked.

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"Didn't Sandy tell you? Alfie Hobble has an estate out near Warhampton, a regular baronial affair—or rather what some Victorian get-rich-quick thought was baronial. He's a fine host and we often meet there."

"And who's we? Egan mentioned Dame Euridice and a few others, but then you arrived."

"We call ourselves The Murderers' Circle. There's Aston Tourneau, the publisher, and Lacey Morland, Alfie's daughter, who thinks she's a femme fatale because she's been divorced three times, and sweet old Marina Federescu, who's a baroness and really *was* a femme fatale—a spy for both sides in World War I, imagine it! But you'll meet them all presently. Did you know I'm starting a new novel? It's about three or four murders at a sort of super house-party at a ski lodge near Aspen—that's in your state of Colorado, isn't it?"

Lasher replied that indeed it was—he knew the area well, he'd skied there many times.

The Murderers' Circle, he thought. Don't these Brits ever suspect how far off the beam they are with their pretty little house-party setups? And now she wants to inflict that sort of garbage on Colorado! But when she started to ask him questions about American police procedure, he managed to answer all of them while keeping a straight face.

She drove fast and expertly, and once they had the worst traffic behind them the miles flew swiftly, even after they left the main artery for a winding country road. Finally she braked, turning in between two great stone-and-iron gates. "Here we are," she told him. "Hobble Manor. Cozy, isn't it?"

He beheld an enormous stone pile, grimly turreted but in no discernible style.

A bald and massive butler stood at the door to greet them. A huge Irish footman who looked as though he might have survived some years of IRA bomb-throwing came out to take the car. "Good *evening*, Gudgins," said Miss Ouseley. "I've brought our guest, Mr. Bryce Lasher."

"Good evening, sir," rumbled Gudgins. "Mr. Hobble is awaiting you. If you and Miss Ouseley will come with me?"

They followed him into a large room, where the members of The Murderers' Circle were chatting happily and busily drinking. Egan, surprisingly there ahead of them, made the introductions—Alf Hobble, dressed expensively but in poor taste; his daughter, much as she had been described; the aged Baroness, busy with a huge martini;

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His Grace, the Bishop of Thaxeter, bluff and florid, looking as though he probably rode to hounds; Braxton Bellingham, thin and dehydrated; Peter Splain in rough tweeds, puffing a malodorous pipe; and the others Egan had already mentioned. Lasher was impressed by none of them, not even by Commissioner Thwaites-Horton, whom he had pictured as a ramrod-straight, sternly martial type but who turned out to be a bit overweight, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, and definitely Churchillian in outline. The only ones who looked at him as though he had been left too long out of the fridge were a Captain Something-or-other of one of the Guards regiments and his drawn, hawk-eyed wife.

Even the Commissioner went out of his way to make Lasher welcome, remarking jocularly that after all it was murder that united them, so that difference of opinion really ought not to be allowed to spoil their fun, and Lasher for once obligingly agreed, telling himself that they really were out to butter him up.

He had one drink—the Scotch was superb—and a second and a third, taking part in some of the small talk and wondering when would be the best time to activate the mini-recorder he always had with him when discussing contracts.

Presently, they trooped into the dining room, having been summoned by yet another large Irish footman, and Lasher was seated in the place of honor between the Commissioner, who apparently was to preside, and the aged Dame Euridice, who chattered away about *la haute cuisine*, fine wines, and the difficulty one had in finding servants nowadays. "After all, Mr. Lasher," she sighed, "we can't all have the luck of Alfred there and find someone as talented as Gudgins, can we?"

The wines were excellent, the food had been prepared by a master chef, and the two footmen had been well trained. Lasher found himself actually glowing, and he started composing, in his mind, the cutting phrases which would tell The Murderers' Circle what he thought of it and of its absurdly dated novels. The talk flowed through him and around him until the last dessert had been praised and finished and the footmen were preparing to serve coffee and liqueurs.

Then the Commissioner stood, held up an admonitory hand for silence, and called the meeting to order.

"It is our good fortune this evening," he began, "to have with us the very well known novelist and mystery critic, Mr. Bryce Lasher, with whose work we are all familiar." He beamed down at Lasher,

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who had flipped on his recorder. "I, for one, must say that I'm delighted to have him here in our midst."

The Baroness Marina Federescu emitted a throaty chuckle and Alfred Hobble politely said, "'Ear, 'ear!"

"Indeed, yes," the Commissioner continued, "and I'm sure that our guest will not feel that I'm imposing if I ask him to say a few words about the subject in which we're all so deeply interested." He looked down again and saw Lasher already rising to his feet. "Thank you," he said. "My fellow members, may I present Bryce Lasher."

He sat down as Lasher stood to polite applause.

Lasher looked them over. "This isn't going to take long," he said. "All I'm going to tell you is what's wrong with you and your whole picture. For Christ's sake, don't you know Sherlock Holmes is dead? That Poirot and Wimsey and all your other so-called great detectives are about as real as Mickey Mouse? Look at your country. My God, you turn out more crap about murder than anybody—and you hardly have fifty murders a year! *Fifty*—that's less than any small town in the USA!"

Forgetting his promise to be terse, he went on in this vein for the better part of fifteen minutes, informing them that they knew nothing about murder and citing several works by those present to prove his point. Finally, "Let me close this with a bit of good advice," he said. "Can it. Quit writing about something none of you know anything about. Go back to scribbling *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*. That's all."

He sat down, again to polite applause, and again the Commissioner arose. Gravely, he looked down at Lasher.

"Thank you, Mr. Lasher," he began. "Of course, all of us here were already familiar with your opinion of the British murder mystery, but it was well to hear it directly and without any of the restraints imposed by literary convention. Therefore, I now shall take the liberty—which I'm sure you will not grudge me—of explaining to you how wrong you are."

Lasher snorted.

"You see," continued Thwaites-Horton, "while we British cannot claim to have invented the detective story, we have done more to nourish and develop it than any other people. In no country has the traditional murder mystery been so popular and over so many years. The traditional form has been an addiction comparable to, let us say, the supermarket tabloid in your own land. This became obvious as soon as the Sherlock Holmes stories started to appear, and it grew

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constantly over the years. At first its social effects were not obvious, and it wasn't really until after the First World War that we at Scotland Yard began to suspect what had been going on. Why? My dear Mr. Lasher, it was because of our *falling* murder rate. As you pointed out, we do not have many more than half a hundred murders a year, and this has persisted despite our increasing population. We noticed it, of course, but by the time we really understood what was going on it was too late."

He smiled at Lasher.

"You see, we were getting case after case of what we knew *had to be* murder, case after case where all the ingredients—motive, opportunity, and so on—were present, but where it was impossible to tie the thing together. Poisoning? The poison couldn't be identified. Blunt instrument? The instrument could not be found. Or the corpse was found where it never should have been. Or neither the instrument nor anything else significant could be linked to the obviously guilty suspect. At length—and, believe me, only after much soul-searching—we reached the inescapable conclusion. Our murder rate had *not* declined. More murders than ever were being committed here in Great Britain—*but*, Mr. Lasher, *they were perfect murders*. Our traditional detective novels had so trained our murdering public that they were now treating the whole thing as an art. Consider, just the novels of dear Dame Euridice are a compendium of every mistake a murderer shouldn't make. We were faced with an insoluble problem."

"You don't expect me to swallow *that*, do you?" sneered Lasher. "So what did you do then? You sure as hell didn't all up and resign?"

"Certainly not. We simply recognized that murder, once so crude a business, was now being practiced as an art and that we would—discreetly, of course—have to make the best of it. As I believe you say in the States, 'If you can't lick 'em, join 'em.' That is the reason some of us founded The Murderers' Circle."

"Honest to God! Do you expect me to *believe* that hogwash?" Lasher pushed his chair back roughly. "Well, listen! I wasn't born yesterday, and I'm not buying any of it. But—" he grinned triumphantly "—you've given me enough hot material for about twenty columns, and you aren't going to be able to deny any of it." He tapped his pocket. "I've got it all on tape."

Suddenly Lasher realized that the members of The Murderers' Circle—including the ravishing Miss Ouseley—were watching him very, very intently.

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"My dear fellow—" again the Commissioner smiled benignly "—I wasn't trying to persuade you. I explained the situation to you simply because we felt that under the circumstances we owed it to you. But you certainly don't worry us.

"After all," he said, "nobody is ever going to know that you were here."

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The killer claimed one or two fresh victims every month, and the police were certain it was all the work of one man—he apparently picked the women up on the street, and no one could remember seeing him. The newspapers put additional pressure on the police by printing stories about The Freeway Strangler to build circulation. The stories sold newspapers, but they didn't bring the police any closer to catching the killer . . .

FATHERLY LOVE

by CARL MARTIN

I walked through the casino slowly, listening to the buzz of conversation and the click of the roulette wheels. Now and then I paused to watch a hand of twenty-one being dealt or observe the throw of the dice at one of the crap tables.

The timeless quality of the big room always amazed me. Now, at eight in the morning, it looked much the same as it did at eight in the evening or any other hour in between. The hum of voices had an unchanging, hypnotic tone—the frenzy of the players was always identical. No matter what might be happening outside in Las Vegas or the rest of the world, within the casino time stood still. I couldn't count the number of times I'd stepped outside and been surprised to find it was raining, or the moon was high in the sky, or the sun was baking the pavement, or it was in some other way greatly different from when I had entered.

True, there were plenty of clues to indicate the passage of time for anyone who wanted to read them. The faces of the cocktail waitresses, dealers, and even the pit boss changed with each shift. The music coming from the lounge was either live or recorded, the players' clothing was a bit less crisp, collars were a bit more wilted, and more men needed shaves. I ignored these subtleties just as I ignored my wristwatch. Time wasn't important to me. Not any more.

I'd made a lot of bad decisions and poor choices in my life. Despite outward appearances, I didn't consider myself a success. Everything that might have mattered to me had been abandoned and/or lost

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track of years before. Also, the results of my latest physical examination had been ominous. The doctor had diagnosed an inoperable terminal cancer. Now my life was in a kind of holding pattern, revolving around the casino.

A few dealers gave me deferential nods as I passed, which I returned. They recognized my face but didn't know who I was. All they knew was that I was a man of importance—I represented the owners in some vague way. I might, for all they knew, be one of the owners myself.

The barber shop was located off the wide corridor leading to the hotel. I usually had a man shave me in my suite, but that morning I felt restless. I wanted to get out and move around as soon as my eyes opened. A walk through the casino to the barber shop had seemed like a good way to begin the day.

Frank, the man who ran the shop, was the only one working and he had someone in his chair. He looked over as I entered and said, "Sorry, sir, I didn't know you was comin' in this morning. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

I gave him a tight-lipped smile and waved my hand to show I didn't mind the wait. Then, as he hurried to finish with the man in the chair, I took a seat next to the magazine rack.

One of the periodicals, a fact-crime magazine with a particularly lurid cover, caught my eye. I picked it up and sat idly turning the pages. The mingled odor of shaving soap, lotions, and hair tonic was pleasant and the sound of the clicking shears nearly lulled me to sleep. Then I saw the picture and read the name. It came like a blow to the solar plexus, forcing me to gasp for air. The article was about a series of grisly murders in Los Angeles and the young man being charged with one of the crimes.

I felt to blame for what I was reading and a wave of anger laced with fear washed over me. Perhaps if I had been a better father—a better husband! Perhaps if— My thoughts came in a disorganized jumble of bits and pieces. Anger was something I was used to controlling, focusing, making work for me. It was easy to handle. But fear was an emotion I'd never felt before. I had seen it often enough, but never felt it myself. Now my hands were shaking. I was afraid I wouldn't have enough time left to do what had to be done. Time was suddenly very, very important to me.

"You okay, sir?"

I looked up. Frank was standing at my side, his face mirroring confusion and concern.

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"Yeah, Frank, I'm okay," I said casually. I folded the magazine and slipped it into the side pocket of my suit coat as I got to my feet. "But I won't be able to wait, after all. I just remembered something I have to do."

I felt his eyes on me as I left the barber shop, but I didn't turn around.

I had one of the prized corner suites on the tenth floor of the hotel tower. From its picture windows I could look down on The Strip or watch the air traffic at McCarren Field. When I first came to Las Vegas, I had lived in a borrowed apartment near one of the small clubs in the northern end of town. I had come a long way in only a few miles.

I kept a suitcase packed and ready on the floor of the closet for such sudden trips as this. I got it out and checked its contents. Then I shaved, changed into a cheap off-the-rack suit, and called the airport to make sure I could get on the noon flight to Burbank.

Al Rossi, the man who managed the hotel and casino, wouldn't be in his office until ten, so I sprawled across the bed and read the magazine article again. It was no more palatable than the first time.

There had been a series of murders in and around Hollywood. All of the victims had been either prostitutes or suspected prostitutes. All had been attractive blondes between twenty-five and thirty-five. And all had been killed in the same way—strangled with a wire garrote, their bodies dumped on Freeway off-ramps like so much garbage.

The killer claimed one or two fresh victims every month, and the police were certain it was all the work of one man—he apparently picked the women up on the street, and no one could remember seeing him. The newspapers put additional pressure on the police by printing stories about The Freeway Strangler to build circulation. The stories sold newspapers, but they didn't bring the police any closer to catching the killer than they had been at the start.

At least that's how it was until murder number nineteen, Karen Simmons. This time the police were able to trace the dead woman's movements on the night she was killed. They found that she frequented a small bar on Melrose near Vine and several patrons and the bartender remembered the man she left with. And they remembered the time. It was exactly fifteen minutes later that her nearly decapitated body was found.

Jon Mason was arrested two days later and identified as the man

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seen leaving the Melrose Avenue bar with Karen Simmons. A search of his car failed to turn up any useful evidence against him, but some interesting things were found in his apartment. First, there was a tweed sportcoat like the one witnesses described him wearing, and it had three long strands of blonde hair sticking to it. Laboratory analysis determined there was a ninety-eight-percent probability that the hair came from the victim.

The light-blue slacks Mason was said to have worn that night couldn't be found, although his neighbors had seen him wearing them earlier in the week. The police interpreted this as damning negative evidence. "That wire garrote sliced into her neck like a knife. He got them all bloody and had to ditch them somewhere," a detective on the case theorized. "If not, where are they?"

His shoes provided the last bit of evidence. They had no idea what shoes he had worn that night, so they sent all three pairs of his shoes to the lab. A pair of ox-blood cordovan wingtips tested positive. "Some effort was made to clean the blood off those shoes," the technician reported, "but they must have been drenched with it. I've never seen a case where so much blood seeped into the seams of a pair of shoes. And it was O-positive, the same as the victim's."

As soon as Jon Mason's picture appeared in the newspapers, a long line of women came forward to identify him as the man who had tried to lure them into his car. Some said he had flashed a phony police badge, others said he pretended to be lost and wanting directions. Neither ruse worked with these women because they were all too familiar with what genuine police credentials looked like and none of them was in the business of doing favors for free.

"As soon as he stopped waving that badge and started waving a fifty-dollar bill, he had a lot more luck," one of the detectives speculated.

The phony police badge was never found—neither was the murder weapon. And no physical evidence was found to link him to the earlier murders. However, the prosecutor was convinced he had all the circumstantial evidence needed for a conviction in the Karen Simmons case. What's more, he was certain in his own mind that they had the right man. "Jon Mason is just the kind of mad-at-the-world loner who ends up as a serial killer," he said. "And you'll notice that string of killings stopped as soon as we had him locked up."

Mason, twenty-four, was described as the product of a broken home. He had come to Hollywood from Chicago three years before

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to get into television. Back home, people had been telling the good-looking young man he should be in the movies. He believed them, quit his job as assistant manager in the produce department of a supermarket, and drove to California. His mother was dead and no one had seen or heard from his father since Jon was an infant. There was nothing holding him in Chicago.

But nothing happened in Los Angeles to fulfill his dreams. No agent was interested in representing an untrained, untested, would-be actor, and no producer would waste time or risk money on an actor who couldn't get an agent. He went from one dead-end job to another, and the months stretched into years. He took a few acting classes taught by aging actors who couldn't find work for themselves. The only time he was on a studio lot was when he paid to tour Universal Studios. Mason was bitter, disillusioned, and striking back at an unfair world in the only way he could think of. It made no difference to him that his victims were no better off than he was.

Judging from the photos in the magazine, he was taking his arrest quite well. He didn't cower and hide his face from the cameras, nor did he appear defiant. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying his new celebrity. It wasn't exactly what he had come to Hollywood in search of, but any attention was apparently better than the total apathy he'd encountered before.

Now he was in jail awaiting trial. I glanced at the date on the magazine. It was the current issue. Perhaps I wasn't going on a fool's errand after all. If he hadn't been convicted, and I had enough time. I swung my legs off the bed and hurried to Al Rossi's office.

His secretary looked up and pushed the button, releasing the electric latch on the inner-office door without a word. I walked in and caught Rossi pouring a shot of bourbon into his morning coffee.

"Hitting the bottle kind of early, aren't you, Al?" I chided.

He shrugged. "I have to do something to get my heart started." Then he noticed the less-than-elegant suit I was wearing. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm taking the shuttle to Burbank," I said. "I'll need some cash."

"Yes, sir. How much?"

"Fifty to a hundred thousand now. In hundreds, old bills. I'll probably want you to send me the same amount in a few days. I'll call and tell you where I'm staying."

"Yes, sir," he said. There were no questions. I'd trained him well.

I prefer Burbank over LAX and try to schedule flights to Burbank

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whenever I travel to L.A. The Burbank airport is smaller and a bit closer to the places I usually want to go. The planes are usually crowded, but there is far less hassle once you're on the ground. There never seems to be a long wait for luggage and there is always plenty of ground transportation available. Also, I am able to blend easily with the briefcase-carrying businessmen who seem to like it as much as I do.

While waiting for my suitcase to appear on the conveyer belt, I called the office of the court clerk in downtown L.A. I was given the name of Jon Mason's court-appointed attorney and the case number.

"Is that attorney with the Public Defender's Office?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

Then I asked the woman to read me the last couple of docket entries over the phone, something they never do—but she must have liked my voice because she did it, anyway. The entries weren't very interesting, but I did learn that the case was set for trial in two days.

Next I called Wilson Kesner's office. Kesner was a criminal lawyer who had come to my attention years before when he filed sixty-eight pretrial motions in a misdemeanor case. He had lost the case and the judge had admonished him for wasting the court's time, but I had filed his name away for future use. He had impressed me as a fighter, and most lawyers don't know enough to be able to file sixty-eight motions about *anything*. Over the years I'd recommended him to people I knew and he had never disappointed.

Now he was well known and high-priced. We had never met and he wouldn't have known my name, so I told his secretary I had been sent by a couple of names he would recognize. She gave me an appointment for later in the afternoon.

By then my suitcase was on the conveyer belt. I retrieved it and took a cab to the Hollywood Holiday Inn. I like to stay in Hollywood because of its central location, not because of its glamorous past or seedy present.

Once I'd checked in and was in my room, I called Al Rossi in Vegas to let him know where I was staying. Then I washed my face with cold water and sprawled out on the bed. I was feeling tired already. My energy level wasn't what it used to be. I used to stay up for two or three nights during a marathon card game and never lose my fine edge, but now I needed a rest after merely sitting for a couple of hours.

When it was almost time for my appointment, I took a cab to

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Kesner's office in downtown L.A. It didn't take long to get there. The Freeway moved swiftly, most of the traffic already heading out of the city by then. Kesner had a suite on the sixth floor of a building a few blocks from the courthouse. I was kept waiting a few minutes, then shown into a large corner room that contained a conference table but no desk. Kesner was sitting at the table. He wore a powder-blue single-breasted suit and a white shirt with a thin navy-blue stripe. His tie was also navy blue. His black loafers had the dull sheen of expensive leather. He was in his late thirties and starting to thicken around the middle, but not so much that he couldn't wear European styling for a few more years. His most riveting feature was his eyes. They were dark and luminous. Reptilian might describe them better. He seemed to look at me and through me at the same time. I imagined he used them to good effect on cross-examinations.

To make up for the delay, I took the seat across from him and got down to business right away. "I want you to represent Jon Mason in his upcoming trial," I said.

"The Freeway Strangler?"

"The man accused of being The Freeway Strangler," I corrected him mildly.

"Of course," he conceded. "The man accused." Then he frowned. "Doesn't he already have an attorney?"

"Yes. Court appointed. Someone from the Public Defender's Office. I want him to have you."

"I'm flattered," he said in a bored tone. "I'm also expensive. What's your interest in the case?"

From years of experience dealing with lawyers, I knew better than to lie, but I didn't tell the whole truth, either. "I just learned about this trouble he's in. I want to help him get out of it as quickly as possible. I guess you can call me a friend, if you have to give me a label."

As I spoke, he had been giving me an appraising look. When he reached my dime-thin wristwatch, he stopped. The platinum case with twelve tasteful diamonds on its face had his full attention. Not many men wear such expensive trinkets and those who do are seldom conscious of their value. Like yachts, if you have to ask the price, you can't afford them. His mental calculator clicked merrily away and his demeanor toward me changed.

"There could be a problem. You say he already has an attorney

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of record. He may be happy with his present representation and not want to change it."

"I imagine a visit from you will convince him," I said. "I'm sure he's heard of you and will consider you an answered prayer."

"Perhaps." Kesner made a show of considering my proposition. "Exactly what are your expectations? Are you looking for a miracle?"

"I don't think so. I simply want you to get him off," I said.

"Well, one thing in his favor—no one is more alone than a dead hooker. No friends or relatives of the victims are pressuring the prosecutor's office. If he does change attorney, that would give us a good excuse for a postponement and the motion should be unopposed."

"A postponement?"

"Yes. Delay is always in a defendant's favor. Witnesses disappear—they move away, die, or the police simply lose track of them. And key evidence can get lost."

"I'm not paying for delays. I want this to go forward as scheduled," I told him.

"In that case, perhaps I can negotiate a plea bargain. He's being charged with only the one murder. They might be willing to accept a plea to second or third degree to get the case out of the way. He'd have to serve some time, perhaps seven or eight years, but he wouldn't have to risk a first-degree murder conviction. That's pretty good, isn't it?"

"Yes, but not good enough. I want him out, not locked away in Folsom. Besides, your seven- or eight-year estimate isn't realistic. He's charged with only one killing, but the police are convinced he committed nineteen of them. Once locked away, he'd have to serve every minute of his maximum sentence. He wouldn't be receiving parole or any other early release."

Kesner knew all that, of course. He'd been testing me to see how much I knew. Now he leaned forward with his elbows on the table and built a steeple by touching the tips of his fingers together. "That brings us to my fee," he said.

Putting my briefcase on my lap and snapping the latches, I opened it far enough to remove two bundles of hundred-dollar bills, fifty in each. "Here's ten thousand," I said. "Talk to Jon Mason and get him to accept you as his attorney. As soon as that's accomplished, I'll give you another fifty thousand, also in cash, to handle the trial."

He put on his bargaining face. "This could be a long, long trial. I may lose other clients—"

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I smiled. "It will be a three-day trial. That's how much time the court has already set aside for it," I said. "Of course, that was when the prosecutor thought he would be going up against a public defender, but I see no reason to change it. And when it's over, an innocent verdict will earn you a twenty-five-thousand-dollar bonus. Not bad for three days in court, is it?"

He had to agree it wasn't.

I sat in the rear of a small courtroom the first day while the jury selection was going on. Kesner handled it well. He asked all the right questions and seemed to know instinctively which prospective jurors might be trouble. Those he caused to make admissions that provoked the prosecutor into using a preemptory challenge, thereby saving his own for possible later use.

The prosecutor hadn't expected any problems, so he hadn't tried to stack the deck by calling a panel of retired postal employees or people who had been quick to vote guilty on juries in the past. It looked as though the names had been selected from the voting register without manipulation. As far as this jury was concerned, both sides were starting even.

I held a yellow legal-size pad across my knees. From time to time I made a note, for my own reference or to remind me to bring some minor point to Kesner's attention. A couple of newspaper reporters were the only other spectators who watched the entire proceeding. Other people, mostly court employees with time on their hands, came into the room, sat on the hard wooden benches for a few minutes, and then left. Jury selection was too boring to hold their attention for long.

The last juror was picked and the judge called a recess. The trial would begin after lunch. Jon Mason was walking between a pair of deputy sheriffs toward a side exit when he stopped, turned in my direction, and smiled. Kesner must have pointed me out to him.

Mason wasn't as good-looking as his pictures. He was one of those people who photograph exceptionally well. In person, he had a hungry look, and his smile was about as sincere as a politician's promise. His jaw was weak and his lips soft and moist—sensuous is the way the newspapers described them, but they reminded me more of a baby's.

I acknowledged Mason's smile with a nod, and then he was gone.

Kesner came up to me. "The trial will be held in Section Fourteen.

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That's a much larger courtroom. They expect a lot of spectators. If you like, I'll get you a pass so you can be sure of a seat."

I shook my head. "Don't bother," I said. "I won't be attending the trial. I've seen all I want to see. I'll call you every evening and you can tell me how things are going."

Mason's defense was wholly dependant on the weakness of the prosecution's case, and the first day of the trial went as expected. There were no surprises. Kesner was able to shake almost every piece of testimony. He chuckled when he told me how his stare made witnesses squirm even though they were telling the truth, thereby lessening its impact. "The judge may even order a directed verdict of acquittal," he said with an uncharacteristic flood of optimism. "The prosecution is going to have to come up with more than this."

But near the end of the second day, the prosecutor did just that. He called a surprise witness—one who had just come forward. A truck driver had seen Jon Mason standing beside a car parked on the shoulder of the off-ramp where Karen Simmons' body was dumped and stopped to give assistance. Mason had waved him away, but not before the man had gotten a good look at him and the blood-spattered blue slacks he was wearing in his headlights. Worst of all, he had noted the time as he was driving away. It was exactly four minutes before another car had come along and spotted Karen Simmons' body beside the road.

That evening when I called Kesner, he was no longer filled with optimism. He was afraid the jury would make its decision without even leaving the box. "It doesn't look good," he said.

"I think you're painting too dark a picture," I said with far more confidence than I felt. I didn't want him giving up before the trial was over. "No one can predict with one-hundred-percent accuracy what any jury will do, you know that. Think of the times you've been surprised. I'll bet there have been a lot of them."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. I have a good feeling about this case. I think that jury is going to surprise you," I said.

On the third day, I waited until the trial had resumed after lunch, then I made a telephone call to the clerk's office. "There's a bomb hidden somewhere in the building," I said. "A very large and powerful bomb." Then I hung up and walked two blocks to where I could watch the main entrance of the courthouse.

People came streaming out onto the sidewalk to stand in clusters,

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looking back at the building. As soon as the Mason jury appeared, I kept my eyes on them. After a while, someone made an announcement from the steps and the crowd began to drift away. It was clear that court had been recessed for the day.

I followed one of the jurors, a retired Army officer named Hauser. He usually had his wife pick him up at the end of the day, but now he had some unexpected time on his hands. He walked two blocks and entered a dimly lit saloon. I followed him inside and took the stool beside him at the bar. We were the only customers.

Hauser looked at me suspiciously. He was a ruddy-faced man with wide shoulders and heavy thighs. Being followed into a bar was a new experience for him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hauser," I said softly.

The bartender came over, we both ordered beer, were served, and he went away.

"Do I know you?" Hauser asked.

I ignored the question and placed my briefcase on the bar. I unsnapped the latches and positioned it so that the lid would screen its contents from the bartender's view. Then I lifted it.

Hauser had taken a sip of beer. He almost choked.

"You're looking at one hundred thousand dollars," I said. "It can be yours." Then I closed the case and held it on my lap.

"How? What—?"

"If the jury you're on brings back a verdict of Not Guilty, the money is yours," I said.

"That guy's guilty as sin," Hauser said, speaking as softly as I was. "He was practically caught in the act. And I only have one vote. How can I—"

"You're a leader," I broke in. "You're almost certain to be chosen as foreman of the jury. You can exert a lot of influence on the others. In any case, you're a man used to taking charge. Do that in the jury room. Set an example for the others. It doesn't matter *why* they may decide to vote for acquittal, the only thing that matters is that they do it. Everyone can determine for himself what evidence to believe. I'm interested in the result, not in how it's arrived at."

Hauser was six thousand dollars in debt and living beyond his means with a wife twenty years his junior. I was sure that briefcase looked very good to him. I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head.

Finally, I knew I had him. He shrugged. "Who cares about a dead hooker?" he said.

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"Who, indeed?" I answered.

I talked to two other jurors that afternoon, making each of them the same offer and speech. I could have had someone do it for me, but it was too personal a thing to delegate. I wanted to do it myself. When I went to sleep that evening, I was sure their greed would insure the verdict I wanted.

The case was handed over to the jury the next afternoon. Kesner, expecting a quick verdict, hung around the courthouse for the first three hours. Then he went back to his office to wait. I spoke to him on the phone. "It's looking better with each passing minute," he said. "The longer they're out, the more chance there is of a Not Guilty verdict. I can't figure it. I thought they'd take one quick vote and be back. I wasn't able to shake that truck driver's testimony. This doesn't make any sense."

"I told you I had a good feeling," I said.

"Apparently you're not the only one expecting an acquittal. Word is getting around. I've had a call from a film producer who thinks there may be a movie in this. Two agents want to represent Jon Mason as soon as he's released. They say he has a big career as an actor ahead of him. And a New York publisher wants to do a book."

"That's great," I said, "but don't get so involved you forget to call me as soon as the verdict is in. Remember, I'll probably owe you a bonus and I'll be leaving the city as soon as I know."

"Don't worry, I trust you," he said, but I knew he'd call me before he did anything else—trust is never a lawyer's long suit.

Kesner called the next morning. "The jury just came back," he said.

"And?"

"The verdict is Not Guilty. You were right."

"What about Mason? Will he be released right away?"

"Yes. They're processing him out of the jail now. He'll stop by my office as soon as he's free."

"Fine. I'll be there in a few minutes."

I packed everything into my suitcase, including all but the cash I had promised Kesner. The jurors, of course, would never see a nickel of the money they expected. It would be foolish to pay them. They couldn't take their votes back and the prosecutor's office would be watching them for months. If any of them came into sudden wealth it would all come out.

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I checked out of the Holiday Inn, put the suitcase into the trunk of the car I'd rented, and drove to Kesner's office.

Kesner was waiting for me at the conference table where I'd first met him. He watched me cross the room with his hooded eyes and smiled. "Someday I'm going to find out how you did it," he said.

"You give me too much credit," I said.

"I don't think so."

To change the subject, I opened my briefcase and paid him the bonus I'd promised. He kept busy fondling the bills until Jon Mason arrived.

Mason skipped to the center of the room, then leaped up and slapped the ceiling with a triumphant shout. "I'm *outa* that damned place! I can hardly believe it!" He stood in front of me. "I'll remember what you did for me as long as I live," he said.

"Probably," I agreed. Then I said, "Look, I've got a car downstairs. Let's take a ride. I'd like to talk to you."

His grin turned into a smirk, as though we shared some secret. "Sure," he said, "let's talk."

But we rode in silence until I had maneuvered the car onto the Santa Monica Freeway. Then I turned to him. "Do you have any idea why I wanted you out of jail?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "I figured that out right away. You're my father."

I felt like howling with laughter. "Oh, no—I'm not your father. I don't have a son. But Karen Simmons was my daughter."

I left his body on the same off-ramp where he'd dumped Karen. It seemed like the thing to do.

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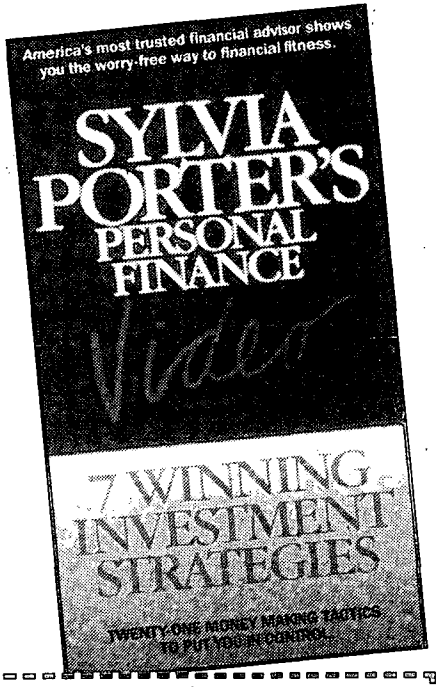
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a *NEW* short story by

RALPH McINERNY

Mildred made the telephone calls in the morning, lining up potential customers, and Paul, after finishing his day of teaching at Roosevelt High School, set out to make the sales. He hated selling water softeners, but it was the only way he could make the extra money Mildred insisted they needed. His one stipulation was that she not make appointments for him within the Roosevelt school district. He dreaded the prospect of showing up at the home of a student to make a pitch.

*Ralph McInerny published two novels toward the end of last year—*Cause and Effect *(Atheneum) and the eleventh in his series about Father Dowling,* The Basket Case *(St. Martin's). It's a pleasure to introduce his first story in EQMM . . .*

BREATHING FREE

by RALPH McINERNY

It was a one-story aluminum-sided house on the edge of town and Paul pulled into the unpaved driveway at 8:30, his last call of the evening and somewhat later than he liked to make a presentation.

An outside light illumined a rust-ravaged sedan parked beside the house. Paul slammed the door of his car as a kind of warning and, briefcase in hand, hesitated, undecided whether to go to the front or side door. He chose the side door, preferring to make his pitch at a kitchen table rather than in a living room.

There was no bell, so he hit the frame of the storm door several times with the heel of his hand. From inside the house came the sound of a television. Would his knock have been audible over it? But then he heard the door being unlocked.

The first time he saw her she was just another potential customer.

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With her wide eyes and heart-shaped face, she might have been a daughter rather than the lady of the house.

"Mrs. Marston? I'm Paul Warner of Waverly Water Softeners. You're expecting me."

"Oh, yes. Someone called. Come in."

There was a child, a little girl, who stood beside the kitchen table and stared at him with eyes wider than her mother's as Paul explained the merits of a Waverly Softener. When he asked if Mr. Marston would be joining them—the question suggesting that there were dozens of rooms, even wings, and the master could easily be somewhere about the premises—the woman had simply shaken her head.

Paul had little hope of making a sale. This modest home, this vulnerable woman and her child, that car rusting in the driveway—she couldn't afford a Waverly. He was wasting his time. What the hell had Mildred gotten him into?

His wife Mildred made the telephone calls in the morning, lining up potential customers, and Paul, after finishing his day of teaching at Roosevelt High School, set out to make the sales. He hated selling water softeners, but it was the only way he could make the extra money Mildred insisted they needed. His one stipulation was that she not make appointments for him within the Roosevelt school district. He dreaded the prospect of showing up at the home of a student to make a pitch.

The appointment at this modest house on the edge of town seemed more pointless than embarrassing and, with little hope of making a sale, he hurried through his presentation.

"I'd like one," Mrs. Marston said when he finished.

"You want to order a water softener?"

She nodded.

"Perhaps your husband would like—"

"My husband is dead."

He felt that he was taking advantage of a widow, but she was quite definite. She wanted to buy a water softener.

"Look at Bridget's hair. And we use up a bottle of shampoo in no time. I need soft water." She paid the full amount by check.

Mildred verified it first thing in the morning and it was good.

"A widow with money—why are you surprised?" she asked. Constant frowning had made permanent chevrons on her forehead. They might have been insignia of rank. When Mildred frowned, his in-

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stinct was to do whatever would improve her disposition. Unfortunately, nothing he did had that effect. Over the years, he had done everything Mildred asked and more, but the frown had only deepened.

Two days later the frown was deeper.

"That Mrs. Marston you sold a softener to—it came and she isn't happy with it."

"What's wrong?"

"I told her you weren't the maintenance man, she can call Waverly."

That was true enough, but it bothered him, remembering that little house, the widow and her child, thinking he had sold her something that didn't work.

That night he stopped by Mrs. Marston's house after keeping his last scheduled appointment.

"Oh. Come in." Her manner was chilly. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"Did you call Waverly?"

"Aren't you Waverly?"

Distinguishing between sales and maintenance would have seemed self-serving. Paul said, "What's the problem?"

"The problem is that I don't have soft water."

He went down to the basement and looked at it. There was plenty of salt, the machine was plugged in. And then he noticed the bypass valve.

"Have you changed anything?"

"No."

He pushed the plastic valve firmly to the right. Almost immediately there was a reassuring hum. "That'll do it."

"Was I supposed to do that?" She gave him a crooked smile. How young was she? She hardly seemed old enough to have a child like Bridget, let alone to be a widow.

"They were supposed to do that when they installed it. It's not your fault."

"And it's not yours, either, is it? I've been blaming you."

"What you paid for this, you have a right to have it work."

"I can offer you a cup of coffee."

He accepted. He was late and hungry and should get home, but the prospect of having a cup of coffee with her at the table where he had made the sale was pleasant. The little girl stood where she had then, moving back and forth as they spoke.

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"Your daughter is beautiful."

"Thank you."

Bridget was a replica of her mother. The thought seemed to occur to her just when it did to him and she lowered her eyes. Paul felt a sudden intimacy with her that startled him. Nor did he find it welcome. The cliche of the door-to-door salesman was what embarrassed him about this way of making extra money. That was not the kind of man he was. And he was sure Mrs. Marston was not that kind of woman.

Her name was Tina. He learned that three days later when he stopped by to see if the softener was now working. He called her from school and drove out during his lunch hour. Her lustrous hair, and Bridget's, made it clear that she now had all the soft water she wanted.

She offered him a sandwich as well as coffee. He told her he had a class at one.

"A class?"

"I'm a teacher."

She sat back and brought her hands together, smiling at him. "Then I was right!"

"How do you mean?"

"You don't seem like a salesman. A teacher, yes. Definitely a teacher."

How do such things begin? Paul put that question to himself many times during the subsequent months, but he could find no answer that made much sense. He just felt right with her. As she did with him. The first time he kissed her, sitting on the sofa at nine in the evening after his last appointment, Bridget came sleepily into the room, dragging her Raggedy Ann by one arm. Paul released Tina and she sat back. Bridget clambered up on the sofa and snuggled up between them and Paul kissed Tina again over the child's tousled, shampooed head.

Tina never asked him about his wife, but Mildred was heavy on his mind. What he wanted was to be with Tina and Bridget all the time. Mildred had never wanted children, she said they couldn't afford them. "I wish you didn't have to," Tina said when he got up to go home.

He looked at her. He wanted her so badly he could have cried. But he loved her too much to turn this into a sordid affair. If only he were free . . .

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"Where on earth have you been?" Mildred demanded when he got home.

"My last appointment took forever."

"With the Wilsons?"

A warning sounded in his head. Mildred knew his schedule. She might have telephoned the Wilsons and learned he had left there before 7:30. It was now after ten.

"Not the Wilsons."

"Well, who then?"

"What is this, Mildred? Are you afraid I'm working too hard?"

"Was it Mrs. Marston?"

The accuracy of her guess discombobulated him. If it *was* a guess. He shook his head, swore, and stormed into the kitchen, where his dinner, covered with foil, awaited him in the oven. He was afraid Mildred would follow him and ask again about Mrs. Marston, but she stayed in the living room.

He ate his dinner in silence and alone. The murmur of the television came to him from the living room, but he had the feeling she was waiting for him in there, she was not done with him yet.

He went directly upstairs and undressed for bed. He was already under the covers with the light off when she came up. Without turning on the light, she said, "I called the Wilsons. I know you weren't there."

"I went back to my office."

"You went back to your office?"

"I had papers to correct."

Silence. In the dark it was easy to lie. He turned on his side, triumphant. Now he could get some sleep.

But the next day at four when Senski the night janitor came on, he looked in at Paul's office. "Your missus called me at home, Mr. Warner."

"At home? When?"

"Noon. She woke me up. She wanted to know what time you were here last night."

Paul nodded. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her I'd have to check my book to be exact." Senski, his mouth slack, held Paul's gaze. Then he winked and walked away.

He should have been grateful to Senski, but he felt awful. Did his peace of mind depend on the collusion of the school janitor?

That night he got home at eight o'clock. Mildred said nothing, but

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her expression suggested she had scored a point. What an annoying woman she was. Had he ever loved her? What he felt for her now was more like hatred. She was all that kept him from a life with Tina.

This thought settled into his mind and he couldn't rid himself of it. Life without Mildred! What a vista of freedom and fulfilment opened up before him when he thought of Mildred as—

As dead. Admit it. That was what he wanted. Divorce? Mildred would fight him tooth and nail—he would end up with nothing. And she would make it as messy as she could. Tina would be brought into it and smeared.

But rather than go on with Mildred now, he could almost wish to be dead himself. His life insurance and retirement fund which were fringe benefits with the school system would give her the money she'd always wanted and she'd be content at last. It was an odd thought—that his wife would welcome his death and Tina be saddened by it. Well, he had no intention of pleasing Mildred or giving up Tina.

Mildred said, "I talked with Senski the janitor today."

"He told me."

"You're lucky to have such a friend."

"A friend?"

"He admires you."

He let it go. Mildred was trying to draw him into something, and silence was his best defense.

"Mrs. Marston admires you, too. Tina, isn't it?"

He said nothing.

"You're so considerate, checking to see that she's happy with her purchase."

He would kill her. If Mildred was pestering Tina, he would kill her. It was bad enough, her calling the janitor, but he would not have her bothering Tina.

It was November, cold and windy, but snow had not yet fallen. He went for a walk to get away from Mildred. And to think of ways to kill her.

He could shoot her, stab her, poison her, smother her. There seemed so many ways one person could kill another, but when he imagined himself actually using a given method against Mildred, difficulties surged into his mind. Smother her? She was a strong woman and would put up a struggle he might lose. That argued

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against stabbing, too. If she put up a fight, as she was sure to do, Mildred would be almost impossible to kill. And he did not want to kill her in any way that would draw suspicion on himself.

Poison posed a similar danger. Of course, he could check with Bennett who taught chemistry, but there must be no one who could turn attention to him afterward. And, above all, he didn't want Tina to know what he was planning. If she were ever to learn he had killed Mildred, she would have nothing further to do with him.

An accident was the only way, but what kind? He thought of various things that could happen to Mildred in the house—slipping in the tub, drowning, falling on the stairs, being asphyxiated, a fire—and he knew such awful thoughts were thinkable only because they promised freedom from Mildred. It seemed fantastic that he might actually kill her. It would be like winning an argument with her, something he had never done. Mildred relished victory too much to be a loser. But Paul told himself his luck—and hers—could change.

Then one night while he was watching the Eleven O'Clock News with Mildred, inspiration came. A local man had died while shut in his garage with the motor of his car running. Had he committed suicide? His wife was contesting the coroner's verdict. It sounded to Paul like a dispute that could never really be settled. Mildred made no comment on the news item, which was good. If she had said anything about it, he would have discarded the idea, but they both just sat there listening and watching, saying nothing.

The more Paul thought about it, the more certain he was that he would soon be breathing free. If Mildred had a fatal accident in her car, no one would imagine he had anything to do with it. All right, that's what he would do—arrange for Mildred to have an accident in the garage that she could not possibly survive.

Scuffling through fallen leaves the next day, finding the chill in the air invigorating, relieved to have made up his mind, Paul returned to the house a determined man. He had put off deciding exactly when he would do it, but even then, subconsciously, he knew he was waiting for winter.

"Mrs. Marston called," Mildred said.

"Something wrong with her softener?"

"That's what she said."

"Did you give her the number of maintenance?"

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"She said you'd done something simple before and it worked like a charm."

"They forgot to push the valve when they installed it."

"And you corrected the oversight?"

Mildred was loving this, she really was, and that left him little to say. It was hard to keep quiet, but whatever he said would make things worse.

"Your wife called," Tina said.

"What for?"

"I'm not sure." She looked at him. "That isn't true. We both know why, Paul."

"I'm sorry, Tina. She shouldn't be bothering you."

She put a hand on his arm. "You've been so good to me. I appreciate it. But nothing can come of it and I don't want to make things difficult for you. You mustn't come see me any more."

"I *have* to." He took her in his arms. She tried to resist his kiss, but finally she gave in, and then more than gave in.

The first blizzard made up for being late by dumping a foot of snow on the city, and then for five days afterward flurries continued, immobilizing traffic, closing the schools. Shut into the house with Mildred, Paul decided the time had come. The suicide story that had run for several days on the news had showed him how to do it.

Carbon monoxide. He would shut Mildred in the garage with the motor of his own locked car running until she was dead. The garage door was operated by an automatic lift activated from the house as well as from the car. Once Mildred was in the garage, he would cut the power and she would be unable to open the door. There was no inside handle on the door—it was a featureless geometric plane—and the button beside the door that turned the doorlift on would be useless after he dealt with the circuit breaker. The problem was to get her into the garage since the continuous snowfall had made staying in the house all but necessary.

Mildred solved the problem for him when she finally said she had to go to the supermarket.

"Better not," he told her. "The driving is terrible."

"The streets have been plowed."

"Even so."

"If I don't go, we'll starve."

"Do you want me to go?"

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Her frown seemed to add another chevron to those on her forehead. "You wouldn't know what to buy."

By arguing against it, he'd insured she would go. Well, he would be ready for her when she came back.

He shoveled the walk for her, then stood at the back door, watching her pick her way carefully down the slippery path to the garage. He had already opened the garage door for her and started her car. After she was gone, he'd go out, start his own car, and close the garage door. Fumes would fill the enclosed space. When she returned and he saw her turn into the alleyway, he would open the door from the house and, after she drove her car into the garage, close the door and throw the switch in the circuit breaker that fed power to the garage and the automatic doorlift, imprisoning her inside. Then it would only be a matter of time.

After he got his own car started and came back into the house, the phone rang. Should he answer it? He tried to imagine what could be made of the fact that he was home, but then realized everyone would know that school had been canceled. He picked up the phone. It was Tina.

"Paul? What are you doing home?"

"School was canceled. Who did you expect to answer?"

A pause. "Your wife has been telephoning me, Paul. She wants to talk."

"Refuse. —Tina?"

"Yes?"

"It won't be long."

"What do you mean?"

"Trust me."

He brought the conversation to a close, fearful he would blurt out what he was about to do. He would have liked Tina to know he was doing this for her, but the only way he *could* do it for her was by not letting her know what he was doing.

"I think I *should* talk with her, Paul."

"Why?"

"You know her and I don't, but I'm afraid she'll *do* something."

"Don't worry, Tina. She won't do anything to harm you and Bridget."

"I'm afraid of what she might do to *you*."

He laughed. "I'll be careful, darling."

He hung up, happy in his certainty that Mildred soon wouldn't be around to worry either of them any more . . .

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An hour later, Mildred had not yet returned. Paul had been pacing through the house. From the kitchen window, the garage looked as it always did—there was no way of telling a car was in there with its motor running. Another half hour passed and then fifteen minutes more before he saw the top of Mildred's car as it entered the alleyway.

He pressed the button near the kitchen phone that activated the garage-door lift and looked at his watch. In fifteen seconds, he would lower the door and cut the power.

But before five seconds had gone by, he heard the sound of a horn. Mildred was summoning him—my God, he hadn't thought of that! She must have bought a ton of groceries and would want help bringing them in before she put the car in the garage. He left the house like a condemned man.

Mildred rolled down her window and frowned up at him. "Your car is running."

"I'm priming the motor." He avoided her eyes.

"Good idea. Help me get the groceries inside."

It took him four trips, and when he came back to take the last bags inside Mildred had put her car in the garage. "Your car must be warmed up now, Paul," she said, waving at the fumes.

"I'll turn it off."

He slipped behind the wheel, a beaten man. His intended triumph had been so easily snatched from him that he felt like a fool.

When he turned off the engine, the garage door swung shut behind him. Odd.

He got out of his car and noticed that Mildred had not shut off the motor of hers. He pulled at the passenger door. It didn't open. The driver's door was locked, too. There was no way he could get inside and turn off the motor. The garage was already thick with fumes from his own car. He had to get out of there. And then he saw that the automatic remote garage-door opener wasn't hooked to the sun visor over Mildred's steering wheel in its usual place.

He turned and moved swiftly to the back of the car, easing his way through the narrow space between the back bumper and the closed garage door. The lethal exhaust was warm against his leg as he sidled past it. There was a button on the wall next to the door that would activate the opener.

But when he pressed the button, nothing happened. The wires had been pulled out and hung free!

Up to that moment, Paul had tried to think of what was happening

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as an accident. Now he knew without a doubt that Mildred was doing to him what he had planned to do to her. He was trapped in a garage already filled with noxious fumes and more were being added every second from the running motor of a car, all of whose doors were locked so that he couldn't turn it off!

How would Mildred explain his death? Even as he posed the question to himself, he could imagine the sad story she would give as answer. He had been depressed lately, he had been working too hard—looking back, she could see that he acted strangely when she asked why he had the motor of his car running in the garage. When she began to worry, it was too late. She had tried to open the garage door, but he had made certain he would not be rescued. He had been handy, Paul had. He had, in fact, installed the automatic door-opener himself as his Christmas present to her a year ago. He imagined her brushing away tears as she mentioned that.

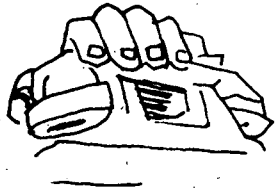
Yes, he *had* installed the damned thing! And he would fix it now! He began to work frantically with the wires.

Maybe he would have managed to reconnect them to the unit if he had not in his panic seized both wires at once and sent the deadly electric current pulsing through his body.

"It was as if he wanted to make doubly sure he would die," Mildred said sadly when she visited the city education department a few weeks later to apply for payment of Paul's insurance. The woman on the other side of the desk whose job it was to help Mildred collect on the two-hundred-thousand-dollar policy seemed to find it difficult to pity the new widow.

"Well, anyway, he's free of all his troubles now," the woman said.

"Yes." Mildred mused. "You're right, of course. I must take what consolation I can from that thought."



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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

The story about the murders had caught Samuel's eye while he was on line at the checkout counter at his local supermarket in West Hollywood. It told about a chainsaw murderer at large in and about a small Texas town. At home in his modest eight-bedroom chateau which he might soon have to sell, he read and reread the story. He saw himself playing the murderer. Chainsaw pictures made millions.

Writing about the second of George Baxt's three most recent novels—The Dorothy Parker Murder Case, The Alfred Hitchcock Murder Case, *and* The Tallulah Bankhead Murder Case—The Village Voice *said: "The most appealing thing about the new Baxts is the way they appear to be contemplations, rather than exploitations, of the famous dead."*

Speaking of dead . . .

GOING TO PIECES

by GEORGE BAXT

There he was in a theater in Underdraw, Texas.

It turned out to be another of those interminably dreary British plays in which the actors spend more time talking to the audience than they do to each other. But he wasn't sorry he bought the ticket. It gave him a chance to study Elsie Lee Mackintosh. Elsie the actress was quite unlike Elsie the giddy broad he'd met at the Hippo Bar the night before. At first he thought it was funny she hadn't told him she was an actress, but five minutes after her entrance he understood why. She couldn't act. She was awfully good to look at, but her attempt at a British accent was worse than lamentable, she

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moved like a Barbie doll, and her eyes darted all over the place like fireflies running amuck.

"Mawtimah Mawtimah—" the character's name was Mortimer "—I shall go to pieces! Or to Paris."

Samuel snickered. The person in front of him turned and gave him a look of annoyance, which he returned with a wink. He had the choice of dozing off or rerunning the events of the night before at the Hippo Bar. He decided on the rerun although it didn't pay residuals. Samuel Tempo was an actor—out of work, which made him a member of a silent majority. His face was familiar. He had appeared in a long-running TV sitcom, *Sew Is Your Old Man*—about a tailor who was a crashing bore—and after that he'd had a very good part in the blockbusting horror film, *Dismember of the Wedding*. Then he formed his own film company, because like your average egomaniacal actor he wanted to write and direct his own films.

He had made that decision two years ago and it was two years since his last job. Most of his savings had evaporated. But he was still determined to write, direct, and star in a movie. Which is what brought him to Underdraw, Texas.

The story about the Underdraw murders had caught his eye while on line at the checkout counter at his local supermarket in West Hollywood. It told about a chainsaw murderer at large in and about the small Texas town. At first Samuel thought it was fiction because he'd seen nothing about the murders in the Los Angeles newspapers, but the story was illustrated with some very gruesome pictures of sawed-up torsos and a photo of Underdraw's sheriff, Yack Trumbull, a role that screamed to be played by Brian Dennehy. At home in his modest eight-bedroom chateau which he might soon have to sell, Samuel read and reread the story. He saw himself playing the murderer. Chainsaw pictures made millions.

After baffling more than a dozen travel agents, Samuel found one who knew how to get him to Underdraw, Texas. She was a Miss Mabel Crossbow, eighty something to say the least, but fortunately she had been a soubrette in musical comedies in her youth and was in a company of *Blossom Time* that had once been stranded in Underdraw.

"Of course," said Miss Crossbow, "it would be easier to get there by stagecoach, but there is a bus connection leaving from Houston twice a week. And I have to warn you, Houston does not have sidewalks."

After thanking her warmly for the non sequitur, Samuel set forth

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for Underdraw. He had arrived the day before, checked into the Four Star Hotel—that was really its name—and after a dreadful dinner in a nearby diner decided to investigate the Hippo Bar.

"Howdy, pardner," he'd said to the bartender as he sat on a stool.

The bartender eyed him coldly. "What can I get you?" he asked without a trace of a Texas accent. Too thick-skinned to be embarrassed, Samuel ordered a draft beer.

While the bartender drew it, Samuel looked around the dimly lighted room. At the end of the bar sat the woman who would later introduce herself as Elsie Lee Mackintosh. A few barstools away from her sat a man he recognized as Sheriff Yack Trumbull. What luck! He took his glass of beer and moved down next to the sheriff.

"Sheriff Trumbull?" The sheriff grunted. "My name's Samuel Tempo." The sheriff grunted. "I'm a Hollywood star." The sheriff grunted. "You must have seen me on TV." The sheriff turned and stared at him. Then he grunted.

"I read about your chainsaw murder," Samuel said. "That's why I'm in Underdraw."

"Lookin' to get killed?" It wasn't a pleasant voice, but Samuel was grateful it wasn't another grunt.

"No, looking for a story that'll make a good movie thriller." Samuel noticed, looking past the sheriff, that he had the woman's attention.

"Ain't we had enough of chainsaw-killin' movies, son?"

"We can never have enough of them, Sheriff. They're surefire moneymakers, especially when you have special guest stars Cameron Mitchell and Vera Miles."

"Ain't never seen one m'self. The real thing's bad enough."

"Exactly how many killings have there been?"

"Can't right tell, son. Not all the parts match up. Got some parts left over. You'd think the coroner could do better than that, wouldn't you, what with him bein' a jigsaw-puzzle freak." Trumbull chuckled and ordered himself another Texas Tornado—which turned out to be a mixture of bourbon, gin, Cointreau, and diet cola.

"When did the killings begin?"

"Oh, been goin' on, on and off now, I reckon maybe five or six years."

"That long?"

"Seems like it. Elsie Lee—" he spoke to the woman at the end of the bar "—how long it's been you been back from Canada now, honey?"

"A little over five years, darlin'."

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"A little over five years." The sheriff nodded to Samuel.

Samuel was astonished. "Over five years, and it hasn't become international news?"

"Well, hell, boy, why should it? Nobody's ever heard of Underdraw. The only reason it got into that supermarket rag is because this here friend of Elsie Lee's, a writer feller—reporter, I think—came here to visit his folks. They told him the story because they're missin' an uncle and three cousins. We've pieced together one and a half of the cousins but I'll be danged if we'll ever find the rest of 'em." He chuckled again. "What a mixup. Anyway, this writer sent the story into that rag and now *he's* disappeared. Elsie Lee honey, you had dinner with him that night he disappeared, didn' you, honey?"

"I sure did."

"Where do *you* think he mighta disappeared to?"

"I don't know, Yack. Maybe he went to pieces—or to Paris."

(Which is why Samuel snickered when he heard her say the line in the play.)

Samuel introduced himself to the woman.

"I'm Elsie Lee Mackintosh, of the Underdraw Mackintoshes. Perhaps you've heard of the Underdraw Mackintoshes."

"I'm sorry. I only just heard of Underdraw."

"I saw you in that chainsaw movie. You were darn good."

"Why, thank you." Samuel excused himself to the sheriff—who was expecting him to because Elsie Lee usually got her man—and went and sat next to Elsie Lee. "May I buy you a drink, Miss Mackintosh?"

"Why, I'd be delighted—and please call me Elsie Lee. Folks around these parts like to say Elsie Lee Mackintosh is named after a cow, a general, and an apple. I'm drinking a Tornado, same as the sheriff. Why don't you try one?"

"Thanks, but if you don't mind, I'll stick to beer."

"You know, I think you're right."

"About what?"

"Our chainsaw killings would make a real good movie. Would you shoot it here?"

"Right here on location."

"Oh, wouldn't that be thrilling! Did you hear that, Yack?" The sheriff grunted. "Hey, Bubu," she called to the bartender, "wouldn't that be a shot in the arm?" Bubu shrugged and wiped the counter. She fixed her eyes on Samuel. "*You* going to be in the movie?"

"That's the idea. Write it, direct it, and star in it."

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"You planning to play the sheriff?"

"No, I think I see Brian Dennehy playing the sheriff. I'm going to play the killer."

"Oh go on!" She waved the idea away with a snappy flick of her wrist. "You're all wrong for the part!"

Samuel leaned forward. "How do you know that?"

"Oh, I just know. Anyway, you don't look the killer type."

"Right on—that's the way I plan to play it. The least likely suspect."

Bubu placed the Tornado in front of Elsie Lee and she took a greedy swig of it. She licked her lips, stared at the slowly revolving ceiling fan over the bar, and then cocked her head. "You know, it might be a very good investment."

"What might?" asked Samuel, motioning Bubu to refill his glass.

"Your movie. Or have you got it all set up already?"

"What? Set up? No, no, it's not set up—I'm just here to start tracking down the story."

"Well, then, I'm in at the beginning."

"I don't understand you, Elsie Lee."

"You really haven't heard of the Underdraw Mackintoshes?"

"I swear, I haven't."

She laughed, and the sheriff laughed, and a dry rattle came out of Bubu's mouth which Samuel suspected was a substitute for hysteria.

"Why, Samuel Tempo, you are talking to the richest woman in Texas," said Elsie Lee, drying her eyes with the tip of a silk scarf she wore around her neck. "I'm one of the richest women in the world. I'm so rich I give wealth a bad name. Did you ever see that movie, *Murder Murder Everywhere*?"

"Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. Very good, too—one of the best about a serial killer I've ever seen. It was based on a true case, wasn't it? The killer was never caught?"

"Damned right the killer was never caught," said Elsie Lee, thumping the counter for another Tornado. "I put up all the money for that one, and I practically wrote the script. I made so much money I didn't know what to do with it, having so many billions of my own to start with. I finally set up a fund for the defense of serial killers. It's a great tax deduction. Trouble is, not enough of these killers are applying for scholarships." She reached past Samuel to a bowl of Fritos, pulled it over, and stuffed a handful into her mouth. In the dim light from a distance, Elsie Lee looked small and delicate,

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but now, his eyes adjusted to the interior, Samuel could see she was almost his height and powerfully built, without an ounce of excess fat. Her large fingers dug into the bowl of corn chips like a spider crane at an excavation site. "Well, Samuel," she said, "you interested?"

"In what?"

"In my money."

Her offer sank home. "You want to invest in my movie?"

"I want to back *all* of it. We could use a lot of that excitement around Underdraw. The town's getting bored with chainsaw killings. I think making a movie here is just the thing to pull us out of the doldrums. What do you say, Sammy boy?"

What did she expect Sammy boy to say? Why, he just whooped with joy and switched from beer to Tornados and got falling-down drunk and all he remembered later was her whispering in his ear that they'd seal the deal the next night at her castle twenty miles out of town.

When he'd awakened the next afternoon, he found a note under his door. While he drank a triple Bromo-Seltzer, which thank God he always carried with him due to a faulty digestive system, he read the note: "I'll pick you up in front of the Hippo at eleven-fifteen sharp. I'm tied up until then." The theater was just down the street from the Hippo Bar, which is how come Samuel saw Elsie Lee's picture out front surrounded by smaller pictures of the other cast members and bought a ticket to see the play.

By the time the final curtain dropped, Samuel felt it was two months since he had taken his seat. There were only a few dozen diehards left in the theater, but the sparse applause didn't dim Elsie Lee's enthusiasm. She took five bows with the cast and then, milking it for all it was worth, with a gusto reminiscent of the late Ethel Merman, she came bouncing back for six more curtain calls, blowing kisses with the reckless abandon of a beauty-contest winner throwing roses to her supporters.

Twenty minutes later, Samuel sat next to her in her custom-built Daimler, hurtling away from Underdraw with the speed of a superjet. "So you really liked me?" she said.

"There's no one like you." He wasn't lying. "You're unique. You're in a class by yourself."

"You think I ought to take it on tour?"

"Why—er—hasn't this play toured before?"

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"Hell, no. This is the world premiere. It's never been done anywhere before."

Understandable, thought Samuel, wisely keeping the thought to himself.

"What did you think of my British accent?"

"It was right on."

"Now listen, Sammy boy," she said with mock severity, "you don't have to suck up to me. I'm as simple and wide open as the Texas panhandle. You're going to get the money for your movie, and, what's more, I'm going to be in it." She didn't hear him gulp, he hoped. "I think I'm ready for the movies now. —There's my little old homestead up ahead, Sammy boy. It looks so great in the moonlight, don't it?"

Samuel thought, *Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.* He said, "It's big."

"Big, hell. It's immense. Poppa had it brought from Bavaria stone by stone sixty years ago. Yeah, it's big all right, and it's quiet."

"You must have a lot of servants."

"Hell, no. I live alone. Always have since Momma and Poppa were murdered."

"Huh?"

"Their bodies were never found. I've had a very tragic life. My parents were very cruel people. I was an only child. My nursemaid hinted there were three or four kids before me who died mysterious deaths, but she was a superstitious old ninny. I felt bad when they found her with that tomahawk in her skull."

"Oh, my."

"Well, here we are, Sammy boy. —You look sick. Something wrong?"

"Oh, no—nothing's wrong. All I need is a drink."

Five minutes later, in a drawing room the size of the Carlsbad Caverns, they were drinking Tornados.

"I had a lot of fun making that movie in Canada," Elsie Lee was saying, "and you've come along at just the right time. I've had a real hankering to get back into moviemaking. Certainly not for the money, but for the camaraderie. I also enjoyed working on that script. Hell, without me there wouldn't have been no script." She was lighting the wood neatly piled in the fireplace, and as the flames sprung to life and danced in front of her her face took on a spectrous reflection.

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"The scriptwriter they had was a hack. No imagination. Everything he wrote had been done a dozen times before. I brought truth to the script. That's what made it work. I described every one of those murders to him in such a way he could see them happening himself. I have a print of the movie. I run it a lot. —How's for something to eat? I could eat a steer. Let's go to the kitchen."

Half a mile into the castle was the kitchen. Samuel hadn't seen one this enormous since the one in King George III's Pavilion in Brighton, England. Everything was obscenely oversized—the stoves, the refrigerators, the sinks, the worktables. Samuel could hear the wind whistling outside and it sent a shiver up his spine.

Elsie Lee was rummaging in one of the eight refrigerators. "Let me see, now. There's quail, pheasant, moose, a cold side of beef, a Westphalian ham, and a jar of pickled herring."

"Anything will be fine," he heard himself say in a voice he didn't recognize as his own. Then he realized her eyes were searching his face.

"Something's wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Something's wrong. You're afraid. Why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid," he lied.

She slammed the refrigerator door shut. "You've guessed."

"What are you talking about?"

"How come I could describe all those killings in Canada."

"You have a vivid imagination. Very unusual, very colorful."

"Don't you bull me. You've guessed. I did those killings in Canada."

"Oh, ha ha ha, very funny." His mouth was parched. His throat was hoarse.

"Twenty-seven in nine months. It was exhausting. I had to fly down to Elizabeth Arden's for a month's rest. Then I went back to do the movie."

"You're a great kidder, Elsie Lee."

"No, I'm not. I don't have a sense of humor. My mother didn't have one, my father didn't have one. Neither one of them laughed when I walled them up in the cellar. Come on, I'll show you where."

"You don't have to." He backed away from her. "I believe you."

She took a strong grip on his right wrist and pulled him to the door that led to the basement. A dank draught of fetid air almost made him retch as she pulled him down the great stone steps into the stygian depths. She had switched on the lights as they began

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the descent and Samuel gasped when he saw nothing but a vast array of unpacked crates and cartons.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," she said. "This is all the loot Poppa and Momma had sent back here from all over the world. They made William Randolph Hearst look like a pauper." She pulled him through another door and then another, and finally she switched on the lights in an enormous cavern. "There, on that wall over there, see them tapestries. The family's behind them." She laughed. "You believe me now?"

Samuel laughed with her. "Damn it, Elsie Lee. You've been pulling my leg all along. You're really a damned good actress." He crossed to the tapestries and studied them. "These are really knockouts." He stepped a few feet back for a better perspective. "Really beautiful. We've got to use this room in the movie."

"Sure we do," she agreed, "it's where I killed them all."

"Ha ha ha ha, Elsie Lee. You're a card."

"Right here in this room, making them promises I never meant to keep. Like building Saul Bixler a new library, and a swimming pool for Sally May Nudkin. Promises, promises, promises, for greedy people who think I'm the state's biggest pushover. I hate greedy people. My people were greedy. Everybody's greedy. And, Sammy boy—" just then Samuel heard the ugly whirring of the chainsaw "—you're one of the greediest of them all." Behind her was an open closet door and in the closet were all kinds of tools. He hadn't even heard her open the door. She was smiling as she advanced on him, the chainsaw gripped solidly in her hands.

"Elsie Lee Mackintosh," he shouted, "a joke's a joke, but this has gone far enough! Now come on, Elsie Lee, cut it out!"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," she assured him.

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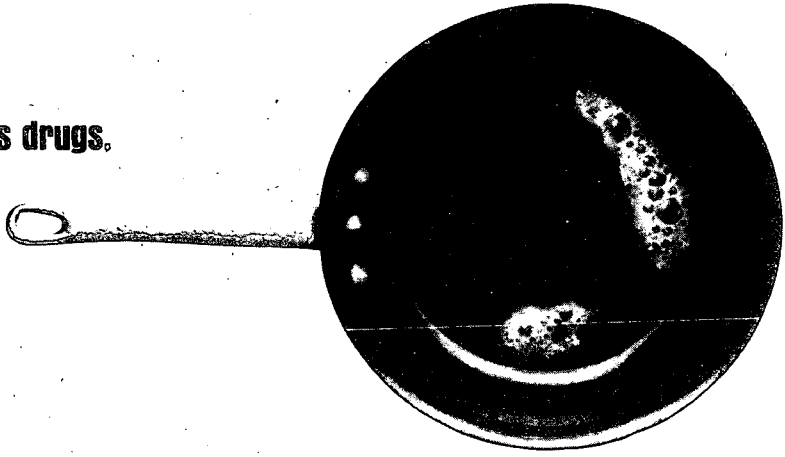
this is drugs.



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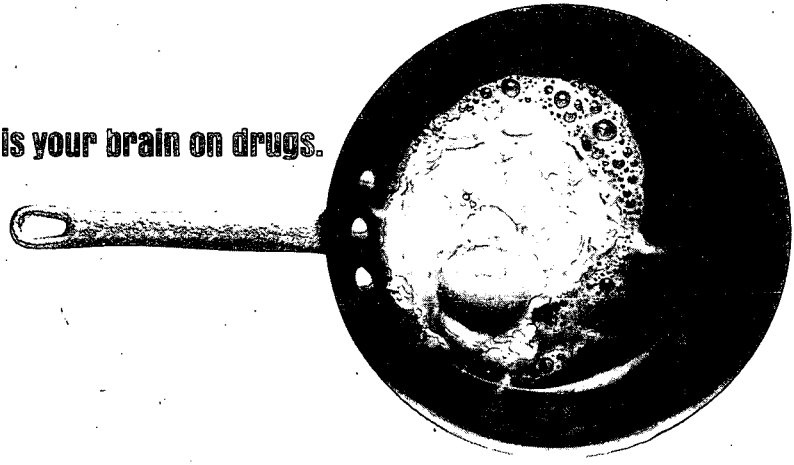

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The first- and second-place winners in the AASSP biennial sales contest faced Sally across the smudged glass-topped table of the isolated tropical lounge three miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean near Wilmington, North Carolina. "First woman ever to sit in the winners' circle," said grand champion Morton Sturdevant. "Let me be the first to congratulate you."

A story we're delighted to publish by new writer Linda O. Johnston, a resident of the Los Angeles area. With apologies to all the honest, hard-working drummers (traveling salesmen and saleswomen) from coast to coast . . .

DIFFERENT DRUMMERS

by LINDA O. JOHNSTON

They were the three supreme salespeople in all of the United States. The American Association of Super Sales Persons said so. And everyone knew the AASSP admitted only the elite of the country's sales force.

Each member had automatically been entered in AASSP's biennial sales contest. Four months before, the Association had sent its questionnaire to every member's employer requesting substantiating statistics: the product each member sold, its retail cost, the company's total yearly sales volume, and the sales volume achieved single-handedly by the member.

The results were tallied, digested, and evaluated, then kneaded together with a fudge factor to allow for the relative cost and utility of each company's product.

The first- and second-place winners faced Sally Manhattan across the smudged glass-topped table of the isolated tropical lounge three miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean near Wilmington, North Carolina. Around them, palely thatched rattan chairs huddled defen-

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sively in empty clusters against the rain forest of the indoor jungle. Ferns strained toward the ceilings, fighting for root space with the shiny-leafed lianas spilling from wood planters and hanging baskets throughout the crannied room. Cool air spurted spasmodically from vents along the off-white wall, but the plucky air-conditioning unit was no match for the oppressively humid heat.

The AASSP grand champion, portly, proud Morton Sturdevant, was effusively gallant to Sally, barely blanketing an offensive male chauvinism in his gushy charm. "First woman ever to sit in the winners' circle of the AASSP contest," he said admiringly. "Miss Manhattan, let me be the first at this conference to congratulate you."

"Certainly, Morton," Sally said, extending her hand with no perceptible hesitation. She braced herself for a damp, flabby handshake but couldn't prevent herself from wincing when instead she felt the back of her hand dolloped with a damp, flabby kiss. She withdrew it, trying unobtrusively to wipe it on the napkin printed with an unclever insult that sat beneath her glass of chablis. What was this porcine obscenity going to do with the $500,000 first-place prize money? Use it to buy diamonds for his three fingers that remained bare?

"And let me be the second," piped Lester Grandsnelter. At least all he wanted was to shake her hand. Lester, quiet and wimpy, played Laurel to Morton's Hardy, Abbott to his Costello, for he was hardly more substantial than the candy-striped drinking straw he used to sip his gin and tonic. This was a super salesman? And he had won $200,000.

Her third prize was a paltry $100,000—barely half a year's earnings on commissions. Better than nothing, yes. But she should have won first place.

"Nice place, this," Lester said in his thin voice.

"Rather," Sally agreed. "It's one of my favorite haunts. In fact, it's owned by my brother. He's reserved the place for AASSP all weekend." She sighed. "It's no special thrill to be here, you know—I live just down the road about ten miles."

"You mean the old AASSP chose a resort in your own stomping grounds to hold its big conference?" Morton said. "That hardly seems fair."

Sally nodded.

"So, a pretty girl like you's a super salesman," Morton continued. "Er, salesperson."

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Sally stared studiously at her glass, not wanting to meet Morton's bright and beady eyes.

"Guess there's nothing to it for you. Just bat them long lashes, toss them dark curls, and give a come-hither look, and what man could refuse to buy from you?"

My looks are hardly what prompt people to buy my product, Sally thought, but again did not grace his comment with a reply.

"It was a good idea you had, Miss Manhattan, for the three of us winners to meet the evening before anyone else arrives for the conference," Lester said, turning a shy but lively smile on her. "Of course, we'll see each other all day tomorrow, then be awarded our prizes at the banquet tomorrow night, so I expect we'd get the chance to talk before getting up on the podium to be the guest panelists on Sunday, but I've always thought it's important for people leading discussions to have some kind of real rapport. And the only way to have it is to get to know each other a bit away from the others."

"Yes, that's what *I'd* hoped," Sally said.

The three remained in the almost deserted bar for a couple of hours. Sally listened silently while the men traded war stories and described sales conquests in foul detail. She watched them belt down one drink after another while she nursed two glasses of wine. (Lester had abandoned the drinking straw.) These were the big contest winners, a big blabbermouth and a mouse. It wasn't fair. If it weren't for them, she could have won half a million dollars instead of a mere hundred thousand.

When she'd had enough of their company, she decided it was time to wind up the evening. "Why, you gentlemen have nearly finished your drinks. Here, let me get you refills."

Without lingering long enough for them to protest, Sally rose and went to the bar at the far end of the empty room. It was late. Even the bartender had gone home.

A few minutes later, she returned to her companions with a small tray containing three drinks.

"So nice of you, Miss Manhattan," Morton Sturdevant effused, taking a long drink from the glass Sally placed before him. Belching slightly, he asked, "Do you two know what you're going to tell the audience was the secret of your success?"

"I've thought about it a lot," Lester said. "Of course, I'm not going to tell a whole conference full of people my real secret, but I think I can trust you two." He leaned over the small table conspiratorially.

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Here it comes, Sally thought wearily. Another long-winded tale.

"You know," he said, "I found out I coulda won first prize in this contest if I'd sold just a dozen more of my product. Like I said, I sell window glass—'specially to stores that've been vandalized. And you know what?" He crooked his finger, drawing his companions closer over the table so that their heads nearly touched. "I, well, I sorta help my business along. Nights when things are quiet, I drive along some closed downtown areas shooting pellets through windows. Next day, well, there I am, ready to sell new plate-glass, have it installed right away. Customers are grateful."

He rolled his eyes from Sally to Morton and back again, apparently failing to find the comradely tolerance he'd expected. "No one gets hurt," he said. "Insurance pays for it all."

Morton raised one piggish paw. "No, my man, I'm not condemning you. The fact is, I admire guts and ingenuity." He took another large swallow of his fresh drink, then, like Lester before him, he crooked his finger, drawing the band together over the table. "I work for an exterminator, like I told you. And when business is slow—well, I've got my own supply of roaches, fleas, even field mice. If I got to—to make a living, you know—I'll put a couple or more into a strategic spot: a big house, a restaurant, a laundry, wherever. In nothing flat, I've got a new sale. I use termites for long-term job security."

The two men leaned back in their chairs, staring at Sally, waiting for her to reveal her dirtiest secret, too, but she just sat staring at them.

"Miss Manhattan, you've not even told us what you *sell,*" Lester finally cajoled.

"You know," Sally said, "when the president of AASSP told me I'd come in third in the contest, he let me know I'd only have had to sell two more of my product to beat you, Morton, since my product is high price, relatively low volume."

"That's a shame, Miss Manhattan," Morton said. "Maybe next time."

"No," Sally said. "In fact, I'm about to make those last two sales." She watched in satisfaction as both men began to clutch their windpipes and turn blue.

Sally hummed as she tidied the place for her brother—who'd swear she joined him hours earlier—washing and drying the glasses and wiping the table with a damp cloth.

She stopped before the inert forms at the table, sizing them up

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with her practiced eye. Fortunately, the company had extra wide funeral caskets in stock as well as extra narrow—top-of-the-line hand-carved mahogany, lined in gold lame.

Strange that they should have thought they were so clever, she reflected as she headed for the door. Their sales-generating technique was not so novel. She'd been using it for years.

DETECTIVERSE

AN APPETITE COULD KILL YOU

by R. P. SHIELDS

"My husband ate like a horse.
I shot him," said she, "with remorse.
He was a good egg,
But when he broke his leg
I had no other recourse."

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"Why did you come to me?" Dan asked.

DuMaurier's smile faded. "No one else would take the case."

Dan flipped through the binder's pages, most of which were blank beneath penciled-in headings. He halted at one marked No One Would Take the Case *and added a forty-second tally mark to the page. Returning the binder to its position on the desk, he laced his hands over his stomach. "All right, Mr. DuMaurier, tell me about the case."*

DuMaurier leaned toward Dan conspiratorially. "The word 'incrementation,' " he whispered, "has been stolen from the English language . . . !"

THE THEFT OF INCREMENTATION

by CHARLES ARDAI

Dan Reed looked up from the editorial page of the New York *Daily News*. A man was knocking on the frosted glass of his door. Dan pushed one of two white buttons on the right side of his desk. An electric crackle announced the activation of the intercom, and Dan returned to reading a denouncement of city corruption.

Two paragraphs later, the knock was repeated. Dan folded the paper and laid it on his desk. "Yes?" he said, not bothering to speak into his end of the intercom.

The man outside the door said, "I'm looking for Dan Reed."

Dan opened the top drawer of his desk and removed a rectangular metal box. On the top of the box were five toggle switches and a thin wire antenna. Dan flipped the uppermost of the switches. On the door, a light went on, highlighting the name *Dan Reed*. Beneath this were five lines of text, each surrounded by a neon halo:

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Aarmchair Detective Agency
Ace Computer Consulting
Aaron Lloyd's Patented Shiatsu Massage
Aalexander the Great—
Magic/Entertainment/Children's Parties

"What for?" Dan asked.

"I need help in solving a theft."

Dan flipped the second switch down and the top vocation was highlighted. He then pushed the other white button on his desk. A buzzer sounded. The man started, opened the door, and came in. As the door shut behind him, the buzzer and both lights went off.

The man looked around Reed's office twice, his eyes pausing only to note the immense desk which took up most of the floor space and that the door behind Dan's chair was marked *Employee Only*. Dan surveyed the visitor considerably less intently, deciding only that the bespectacled stranger was the plainest character ever to pass through his doorway. He had sandy hair, a sandy complexion, a sandy moustache, and a sandy bowtie, all of which were at odds with the deep, rich blue of his suit.

Dan waved the man to a seat by the desk and waited.

"Are *you* Dan Reed?" the man asked.

Dan nodded.

"My name is Alain DuMaurier. I would like to hire one of your detectives to solve a very puzzling case for me."

Dan reached across his desk and shook DuMaurier's hand. "I'm hired," he said.

DuMaurier's left eyelid twitched, a spasm made monstrous by the magnification of his wire-rimmed lenses. "You don't want to know anything about the case?"

"That can come later. You want to hire me?"

DuMaurier waffled noisily, his moustache brushing his lower lip. "Can you pay three hundred dollars a day, plus expenses?"

On this point DuMaurier was certain. "Anything, if you can find me an answer to my problem."

Dan tightened his grip on the other man's hand. "Then we have a deal." He took a three-ring binder labeled AARMCHAIR from a row of four on his desk. "One question. Did you select the Aarmchair Detective Agency because we're the first in the phonebook?"

"First in the—? Of course not, Mr. Reed. You're *not* the first." DuMaurier pulled a tattered list of names, addresses, and phone numbers from his inside breast pocket and pointed to it. Most of the

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entries were crossed out. "You're the second—AAA-ZZZ Private Investigations is the first. They opened an East Coast branch a few months ago. Your phone directory is obsolete."

Dan jotted a note to himself: "Change name to Aaarmchair."

"So why did you come to me?" he asked.

DuMaurier's smile faded. "No one else would take the case."

Dan flipped through the binder's pages, most of which were blank beneath penciled-in headings. He halted at one marked *No One Would Take the Case* and added a forty-second tally mark to the page. Returning the binder to its position on the desk, he laced his hands over his stomach. "All right, Mr. DuMaurier. Tell me about the case."

DuMaurier removed his glasses, wiped them briskly with a burgundy pocket-square, returned both the eyeglasses and the handkerchief to his suit pocket, and leaned toward Dan conspiratorially. "The word 'incrementation,'" he whispered, "has been stolen from the English language!"

Dan did not flinch. When other agencies refused to accept a case, it was usually with good reason. He tore his "Aaarmchair" note to himself off his notepad and wrote down the word "incrementation," then tore this off and handed it to DuMaurier. "Three hundred dollars," he said.

DuMaurier closed his eyes and sank back in his seat. "I had hoped you'd understand. It's not merely the written word that's missing, it's the word itself."

Dan retrieved his slip of paper, opened a desk dictionary, and copied out the word's definition. DuMaurier shook his head. Dan shook his head, too. Why couldn't it have been simple? And not only wasn't it simple, but the man had no sense of humor. Dan crumpled the piece of paper and tossed it into the wastebasket.

"Why don't you let me explain?" DuMaurier suggested.

"Go ahead." Dan leaned back warily.

DuMaurier cleared his throat. "I'm the vice-president of Ramanex U.S., the American division of Ramanex International. We're a computer development company based in France. I was pleased to see you're involved with computers yourself, yes?" Dan said nothing. "In any case, we're in the process of importing to this country some of Europe's finest computer technology."

Dan chuckled, to his client's discomfort. "You may have heard of Minitel?" DuMaurier said. "France has brought computer use to a new level with Minitel—a new *plateau*, you might say."

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"I might," Dan replied, "if I knew what Minitel was. I didn't know France had a telephone system, much less a computer system."

DuMaurier's face reddened, almost attaining the tint of his pocket-square. Dan reached behind his chair and opened the door. "Do the French have anything that can top this?" Through the doorway an unmade bed was visible, as was an IBM Personal Computer.

DuMaurier shook his head. "You are correct," he said. "Until recently, France did not have a modern telephone system. Today, however, they have one of the best in the world. They also did not have a modern computer system until Minitel came along and revolutionized their entire society. You see, the French have not made their advances in the design of new machinery—they have instead taken astonishing strides in the application of telecommunications technology. And Ramanex has taken the field even further than Minitel."

"That's very interesting," Dan said, "but where do I come in?"

"In a nutshell," DuMaurier said scornfully, "Minitel began as a computer-based telephone directory, a vast improvement over traditional phonebooks since it meant that the perennial scourge of obsolescence could be avoided. This new idea gained such widespread support that other services were added, including an on-line dictionary, and conversation facilities by which means users could hold conversations with each other over their computer screens. These are the technologies that Ramanex emulated and advanced, the technologies we are in the process of importing to America."

DuMaurier was interrupted by a knock on the door. Dan turned on the intercom and a shrill female voice shot through the speaker.

"Is this Aalexander the Great Entertainment?"

Dan flipped the fourth and fifth switches on his control box.

"My son is having a birthday party on the eighteenth. How do I go about hiring a magician?"

"Excuse me," Dan said to DuMaurier. *"Can you pay a hundred and fifty dollars an hour?"* he bellowed.

The woman considered this and her frosted silhouette nodded.

"You have just hired Aalexander himself! Just bring the kids over at three!"

"I have to bring the kids over here?"

Dan thundered in the affirmative.

The silhouette muttered and disappeared.

"Go on," Dan told DuMaurier.

"Let me make it simple for you. Computer owners pay a monthly

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fee to Ramanex, in return for which they can hook up to our computers and use our services. Picture it: you're a writer in the middle of an important essay and you need a synonym. You type in a root word and out comes a list from our thesaurus. Or you want to find a nice French restaurant for a spot of *dejeuner*. You just call up our directory and get the names and phone numbers of half a dozen cafes. Or you want a detective agency—" DuMaurier put his tattered list in front of Dan and tapped it with his forefinger.

"But here's the problem," he explained. "I am personally in charge of our dictionary services, and the other week I was double-checking our listings and I found that 'incrementation' wasn't there. I tried to locate it through synonyms, rhymes, and definitions, and it was nowhere. Someone had been careless, I figured, so I typed it in myself. The next day it was gone again. This has happened every day since! I type it in, it disappears. Do you understand the scope of this calamity?"

Dan shrugged. "Actually, no. I've gotten along quite well for the past thirty-three years without 'incrementation.' Before today, I don't think I've used the word."

"You've gotten along quite well?" DuMaurier seemed personally insulted. "You watch a black-and-white television show without incrementation and all you see is black and white—no grey! Incrementation lets you have warm water in addition to cold and hot! Incrementation lets you like liver more than spinach and onions slightly less!" DuMaurier sputtered to a halt. "In any case, maybe today it's just incrementation but tomorrow it could be 'hearth,' or 'American,' or 'detection.' How would that suit you?"

Dan nodded. "I'll solve your problem for you," he said, "if it can be solved. The first thing you have to do is give me an account with Ramanex." He rolled his chair into the other room and waited for DuMaurier to follow. "Then we'll have to go to your office. I'll see where we want to go from there."

DuMaurier sat before the computer screen and Dan put his feet up on the bed. DuMaurier switched on Dan's computer and began dialing Ramanex's number on the phone hookup beside the glowing green monitor.

"One more question," Dan said. "You've evidently already gone to a lot of other agencies. If I was second on your list, why didn't you come to me second?"

DuMaurier held the receiver to his ear. "Mr. Reed, I was seeking help with a dictionary. You couldn't even spell 'armchair . . .' "

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The screen cleared. An ugly beep accompanied a message announcing that the system was warming up. DuMaurier looked back over his shoulder at Dan, who was now bent over DuMaurier's bare desk, examining a spider plant placed perilously close to the office's open window. A thin green leaf trailed over the sill and dangled fourteen stories above the sidewalk.

"Mr. Reed?"

Dan paced back to DuMaurier's computer table. "Your account will officially be registered as soon as you select a password. You'll be able to use your computer to link up with ours and no one else will be able to enter your account." The screen displayed the word "Name," followed by a flashing square cursor. Dan leaned over DuMaurier's shoulder.

"Your password can be up to fourteen letters long. Obviously, the longer the password the harder it will be for someone to stumble on it by random guessing. Unless it is just your name spelled backward, that is."

"My name spelled backward is four letters long," Dan said as he typed in his name, forward.

"That was just an example." The screen now asked for a password. Dan counted in his head for a moment and typed in "incrementation."

"I already tried that," DuMaurier said. "There was no one on the system using it as a password. And even if there had been, it wouldn't have affected the dictionary." The screen noted that the password had been recorded.

Dan returned to the spider plant. "Don't you want to see the rest of the system?" DuMaurier asked.

"I'll do that from my office. Why don't you let me meet your staff?"

DuMaurier turned the computer off. "Come with me." He walked to the door.

Dan sat down in DuMaurier's chair. "Maybe it will be better if you bring them in here. That way I can see them one at a time—they won't be able to influence each other."

"They have private offices."

"So do you."

"I don't really want to call them here to my office. They'll think something's going on."

"Something *is* going on."

DuMaurier wasn't convinced.

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"Look," Dan argued, "I took your case when no other agency was willing to."

"Can you at least tell me why?"

Dan took a deep breath and released it. "Let's just say I'm a minimalist. I like to do everything in as few brushstrokes as possible."

"You mean you're lazy."

"I believe in economy of effort. You can call it what you wish. I get results."

"That, Mr. Reed, remains to be seen." DuMaurier left the office. Dan wheeled the chair over to the computer. When the first menu of options appeared, he chose "Help." A block of text appeared.

"Welcome to Ramanex U.S.! Options available today are:

*P*hone Directory
*D*ictionary Services
*C*hatroom Network
*H*elp

"You are currently in Help."

That certainly was helpful. Dan typed "D."

"Welcome to Dictionary Services! You can use:

*L*exicon
*T*hesaurus
*R*hyming Dictionary
Return to *M*ain Menu"

Dan typed "L" to access the lexicon. The computer responded to his query about "incrementation" with the message, "Word Not Found."

The door opened and DuMaurier returned. Trailing three steps behind him was a short man with greasy black hair that fell in unkempt ringlets over his forehead. DuMaurier announced Salvatore Argeiphontes and left, closing the door behind him.

Dan and Argeiphontes sat without speaking for half a minute.

Dan broke the silence. "Salvatore?"

"Italian," Salvatore answered. His voice was not altogether unpleasant.

"Argeiphontes?"

"Greek."

"Sal?"

"You can call me Sal."

"Incrementation?"

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"Is this a lie-detector test? I haven't stolen anything, I've never been arrested, I don't use drugs." Sal shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I hate these things."

"Do you see a polygraph, Sal?" Sal shook his head. "I just want to know what the word 'incrementation' means to you."

"Incrementation? It doesn't mean anything to me."

"That's the problem, Sal." Dan pointed to the screen. "It doesn't mean anything to the computer, either. What do you know about this?"

"Nothing."

"What do you do, Sal?"

"I'm a programmer. I worked on the system in France and now Ramanex wants me to fine-tune it for the American market."

"And you have no idea why the computer dictionary is missing a word?"

"Maybe Adam forgot to enter it."

"Adam?"

"Adam Adler. He handles all the data entry."

"Send him in," Dan said.

But Adam Adler had nothing to add. He'd handled so much material in his seventy-odd years as a typist that he never remembered any of it, but he offered to re-enter the missing word. Dan thanked him but declined the offer.

Dan's next subject, Genevieve Ancienne, filled the dual roles of coordinator of the chatrooms and translator, and filled them most appealingly. Dan was so impressed by her impassioned explanation of public and private chatrooms—the latter being reserved for the most intimate of conversations—that he didn't get around to asking her about the dictionary. He did give her a business card for Aaron Lloyd's Patented Shiatsu Massage, though.

He then spoke with three more programmers, a sales representative, and two dozen petty executives. Halfway through, he stopped explaining the problem and by the end he just asked the executives how much they liked working for Ramanex and let it go at that.

After his final interview, he navigated the maze of antiseptic corridors and cubicles until he arrived at the receptionist's desk. The receptionist was a hatchet-faced young man named Rachou who spoke in a thick Gallic accent. When Dan asked, Rachou explained that he didn't care one way or another for working at Ramanex and had acquired his position merely as a stop-gap on his way to world-wide acclaim as a thespian.

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Dan left the office and caught an elevator. Before the doors had a chance to close, DuMaurier ran up and waved his hand over the elevator's electric eye. "You should have waited for me to return, Mr. Reed!" he complained. "What have you found?"

Dan shrugged. "I'll have to think about it."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"That's what I have to think about. I'll call you in a week." Dan pressed the CLOSE DOOR button and sighed. It had been a long afternoon—this time he had earned his fee.

The taxi back cost Dan four forty-five, which he rounded out to five dollars. The cab let him out at Herald Square and Dan walked down to Thirty-second Street, refusing a falafel vendor and three beggars on the way.

The elevator to the fourth floor took twelve minutes to arrive and as long again to complete the ascent, then its doors opened onto a cavernous black-walled room whose three occupants sported black vests marked with the emblem of Lou Tannen's Magic Shop.

"Ira," Dan said to a portly man whose tongue was pierced with a foot-long steel spike.

"He'o, 'an."

"Take it out first."

Ira withdrew the spike and laid it on a velvet mat. "Hello, Dan. What's up?"

"Birthday party on the eighteenth. What's new with you?"

"Nothing." The spike floated off the mat to Ira's hand. "Wait—there's this." He put the spike into a display case, from which he withdrew a plastic-wrapped mass of cloth. "It's called Lumpy. You've got four silks, they disappear, change places, and change colors: All sorts of effects. If you work with doves, there's a great finale."

"I use a rubber dove."

"It's not the same."

Dan picked up the package. "Still, I'll take it."

The elevator bell rang and a man whose face and hands were painted silver entered, followed by two teenage boys. Dan motioned toward the open door of the storeroom. Ira nodded and led him in.

The storeroom was even larger than the display room and considerably more cluttered. Ira brought Dan to one of the aisles between the overflowing metal shelves and leaned against a cardboard crate labeled HANDCUFFS.

"What can I do for you, Dan?" he asked.

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"I'm working on a new case," Dan said. "Okay if I bounce it off you?"

"Go ahead."

Dan counted points off on his fingers. "First, a dictionary on a computer system is missing a word. Second, the word disappears each time it's re-entered. Third, this is probably because the computer understands the word in a capacity other than that of a dictionary entry. Fourth, the capacity could be that of a password to enter an account or a private conversation—except that, fifth, it isn't listed as either and, sixth, that wouldn't explain the effect on the dictionary. And that's where I'm stuck, Ira. You've got a mind for this sort of puzzle—does anything grab you?"

Ira groped in his pocket and pulled out an Eisenhower dollar. "Dan, you're a magician. Think it out." He tossed the coin back and forth between his hands. "How is it done?" Ira closed his left hand over the dollar and extended his fist toward Dan. "Blow." Dan blew. Ira opened his fist to reveal a disc of clear glass. "Now, how did I do that? Either the coin actually changed or I did something to make it look that way. You can examine the disc all you want and you won't find anything. Why?" Ira turned his other hand over. Nestled in his palm was a dollar-sized metal shell, on the inside of which was embossed an image of Eisenhower's head.

"You won't find anything because you're looking in the wrong place."

Ira squeezed the disc into the shell. The head was visible through the glass. Except for a hint of unnatural gloss, the coin looked normal.

Dan plucked it from Ira's fingertips. "I'll take one of these, too."

The wrong place. Ira thinks I'm looking for an answer in the wrong place.

Dan, back in his room, practiced palming the shell as his computer finished connecting to Ramanex. When prompted, he typed "C."

What other place is there? he asked himself.

"Welcome to the Chatroom Network! You can:

Enter public chatroom (*1–7*)
Open public chatroom (*8*)
*E*nter private chatroom
*O*pen private chatroom
Return to Previous *M*enu"

Dan was surprised to see seven chatrooms in use. It was past

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eleven-thirty and according to Genevieve most people signed off around ten. Dan typed "1." All but the last option were erased from the screen. A message appeared immediately.

"Hello, newcomer. We've been discussing sexism. What's your handle?"

"Dan Reed," Dan typed. "Yours?"

"I'm the Queen of Sheba. You must be new. No one uses her real name."

"Why?"

"It's part of the fun," the Queen answered. "Is that 'Dan' as in 'Danielle'?"

"No." The screen remained static. "Anyone home?" Dan typed.

"There are four of us here," came a response. "I'm the Duchess of Windsor."

"I'm Lady Macbeth," came another.

"How can I tell whose message I'm receiving?" Dan typed.

"You can't. That's what it's all about."

Dan typed "M" and the menu of options replaced the conversation on the screen. Then he typed "1" to return to Chatroom One.

"Queen?"

"Dan?"

"Call me Aalexander the Great."

"Watch out for typos, Alex."

"Queen, what happens if I want to send you a message with a number or the letter 'M' in it?"

"You send it. Like you just did. The only thing you can't do is send me an 'M' or a number on a line by itself—if you do, the computer will think you mean it as a command. But you can always spell out a number or put quotes around a letter."

" 'M.' "

"What?"

"Just testing." Dan returned to the menu and typed "E."

"Password required for entrance into private chatroom," the computer demanded. Dan typed "incrementation."

"No such password is in use. Would you like to open a private chatroom?"

Dan answered that he would not and the menu reappeared once more. He flipped the gimmicked coin onto the bed. Obviously, he *was* looking in the wrong place, but the password solution was the only one that made any sense. Could the computer be mistaken? Or was he missing some vital piece of information? Maybe there was

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something he didn't know about how the chatrooms worked. Idly, he pushed "H."

"Options available today are:

Enter public chatroom (*1–7*)
Open public chatroom (*8*)
*E*nter private chatroom
*O*pen private chatroom
Return to Previous *M*enu

"You are currently in Help."

Dan pushed himself away from the computer. The "Help" feature was useless—he didn't understand why Ramanex had bothered to include it. He retrieved the coin from beneath the tangle of bedding and rubbed his thumb over its smooth glass face. The wrong place—Ramanex hadn't included it.

Dan did a double-take. "Help" hadn't been one of the choices on the menu. Maybe the feature was there by accident, and maybe no one else knew it was there, or maybe people knew but didn't care—still, he had accessed it and it hadn't been a choice. And if he could do that from the chatrooms, maybe it would work from the dictionary!

Dan returned to the dictionary menu and crossed his fingers. When asked to choose between the lexicon, thesaurus, rhyming dictionary, and menu, he typed "E." The computer ground away at his request, eventually responding with a demand for a password. Dan typed "incrementation" and tightened his middle finger's grip on his index finger.

This time the response was immediate.

"Entry granted."

Dan jumped from his seat as the screen wiped itself blank. A private chatroom hidden in the dictionary network! So the dictionary understood "incrementation" as a password instead of as a word—that was why the computer ignored DuMaurier's attempts to re-enter it! To change the computer's mind about "incrementation," the system would have to be reprogrammed.

Several lines of text had appeared on the screen and they seemed to demand a response.

"I'm glad you're early. I'm not sure how much longer we can use this chatroom. DuMaurier hired a detective and he knows the password. Did he talk to you?"

"No," Dan typed. "How much does he know?"

"Just 'incrementation.' He doesn't know what it means. I don't

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know what to do, love. We can change the password again but if DuMaurier noticed 'incrementation' he'll notice anything."

"What was the detective like?" Dan asked.

"He was an inquisitor. He made me so nervous I had to get out of there. I passed the buck to Adam Adler and ran."

Sal! Dan started a new line, but was interrupted by a message from the computer.

"New party entering chatroom."

"It must be that detective!" Dan typed.

"What detective?" This, evidently, from the new entrant.

"Sal, he's trying to trap us," Dan typed.

"How did you find out my name?"

"Who are you talking to, Joe? Who's Sal?"

"I'm Sal," Dan typed.

"What?"

"How many people are in here?"

"I am," Dan typed. And then on another line, "So am I."

The screen froze. Dan tried to type but his keystrokes produced no text. A list appeared. "On-line: Salvatore Argeiphontes, Dan Reed, Genevieve Ancienne." Then a message line: "I'm sorry, darling. I know we promised not to try to find out each other's identity. There was no other way."

"Sal Argeiphontes? I never pictured you as short as Sal."

"Well, I never pictured you as beautiful as Genevieve. I mean, as beautiful as you are."

"Thanks a lot."

"You know what I mean."

Dan tested his keyboard and it was functional again. "Sorry to break this up, folks, but what's going on? Do you two know each other or don't you?"

"Not off the system. She calls me Joe after Joe Gargery, from *Great Expectations*. And she's Estella. She *was* Estella. It's our favorite book. Genevieve Ancienne. I can't believe it."

"Dan Reed? Who are you? Are you the guy from the massage parlor?"

"I'm an inquisitor. Your boss hired me to find a missing word. How about you two? What's the story?"

"I met Joe in a public chatroom. We talked every night for a month and we fell in love. Eventually we moved to a private room. Then we discovered we both work for Ramanex and we knew that people

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from the company could monitor even the private chatrooms. That's why Joe set this one up."

"Why would anyone monitor you?"

"Not anyone, Mr. Reed. Alain DuMaurier. If he got his hands on any of this he'd use it to blackmail us. We're both married, you see. And he probably wouldn't just demand money. He's had his eye on me since I started here."

"Genevieve?" Dan asked.

"No. It's me—Joe."

"We just wanted a place to talk, alone. That's not anything horrible. Joe and I agreed to use the dictionary because we didn't want to incapacitate a name in the phone directory. If we had used a name, no one could have gotten that person's phone number. But 'incrementation'—who'd miss 'incrementation'?"

"Are you kidding?" Dan typed. "Without 'incrementation' you couldn't like onions."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing. It's just something DuMaurier was telling me."

"When we started we used different words. For a while we met under abacus. Then for a long time we had our nightly tryst under hedgehog."

"It was heavenly, Joe."

"It was that good?" Dan asked.

"No, Mr. Reed. It was 'heavenly' that we met under, not 'hedgehog.' We decided not to use nouns because people always need to have nouns defined. Don't you remember, Joe?"

"Yes, you're right." For a moment, the screen was still. "So what happens now?"

"Frankly," Dan typed, "I agree with you. I'm not crazy about DuMaurier myself. For all I care you could stay here. But even if I don't tell him he'll figure it out eventually. More important, if I don't tell him I'll have a hell of a time getting paid. Sorry to be so crude but a guy's got to live."

"We understand."

"But I said I'd call him in a week. You've got until then and I think I can buy you another week after that. Then you're on your own. If 'incrementation' isn't back where it belongs after two weeks I'll take a transcript of what you just told me to DuMaurier."

"You haven't been printing this out."

"No? I don't think you want to take that chance. Why don't you

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just find some other way to meet each other? Face to face, for instance?"

"You don't understand. The anonymity, the distance, the lack of inhibitions, that's what it's all about."

"So I've heard," typed Dan.

Dan pulled the red silk through his fist, from which it emerged green. He repeated the procedure, this time turning the green silk yellow. Finally, he shook the silk between his hands and a colossal bouquet of paper flowers erupted from the center. Sitting atop the bouquet was a dove.

"A bird!" exclaimed a young man who had that very day attained the age of six years. Dan lifted the dove from the flowers—this was the sole weak spot in the routine.

"It's a real bird, isn't it?" The child's question was echoed in the eyes of his peers, of which an even dozen were crowded into Dan's office. Dan sat perched on top of his desk, surrounded by props that he'd used earlier in the show.

"Actually," Dan said, "he's rubber." He dropped the bird to the floor and it bounced up to his hand. The child's eyes widened and began to quiver, as if he were trying to decide whether to cry or be doubly amazed. "But once he was real," Dan reassured him, "and one day he may again become real. Until then, he remains magically transformed. And if you'd like, you may have him." This tilted the scales solidly in favor of amazement. The boy turned to his mother, who nodded, and he reached out to Dan. Dan placed the rubber dove gingerly into his hands and then showered the room with confetti and streamers. The show was over.

Dan went into the other room as soon as the mother ushered the children out of the office.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he typed. "I had a show to do."

"You have kept me waiting for a week," DuMaurier said over the computer. "What does another two hours matter?"

"I won't hold you any longer. I just wanted to tell you I have solved your problem. Your dictionary will be intact very soon. All I demand is that you refrain from querying it about 'incrementation' for one more week. The adjustments I have made are delicate and any interference could ruin them."

"I refuse to pay you for a week of doing nothing."

"Naturally. I have already mailed a bill for this week's labor and

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incidental expenses. You needn't pay it until 'incrementation' is returned."

"I won't. But you must tell me who took the word and how it was done."

"You took it," Dan typed. "In your sleep. You might want to see a doctor about that."

"You don't say."

"Oh, but I do."

"One more thing, Mr. Reed. You can consider your free account terminated as soon as you sign off. If you want to use Ramanex in the future you will have to buy your own subscription."

Dan typed "M," cutting off his meeting with DuMaurier. DuMaurier was an insufferable lout and Dan had no intention of returning to Ramanex.

There were twelve public chatrooms open and on a whim he entered number six.

"Hello," came the message, "Mister—?"

"Bond," Dan typed. "James Bond."

"So we meet again, Mr. Bond. You haven't forgotten your Moneypenny, have you?"

Dan leaned back in his chair and put his feet up. "Of course not. Care to come with me on a mission?"

"I'll come with you anywhere," said Moneypenny.

Dan smiled as he pondered a response. There was a certain appeal to the minimalist in him. No confrontation, no prejudice based on physical characteristics—chatrooms were the stripped-down essence of human interaction. He had until he logged off to roam the world with Moneypenny. And then? Maybe buying time on Ramanex wouldn't be such a bad idea, after all.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

A small subspecies of the mystery story explores a world turned upside down, an individual caught in a situation where nothing makes sense, where things are inexplicably not what they were, where memory and sanity are not to be trusted. Two British writers who have served up such baffling delicacies come to mind: Martin Russell and L. P. Davies.

Now, perhaps, if one book is enough, we can add another name, also from England, as Charles Russell debuts with *Long Live the Spy* (Doubleday, $12.95). Sergei Roff runs a travel agency in London, a tranquil sort of existence. Into it walks a beautiful American, bringing money and opportunity — opportunity in the form of her friend, financier Laurence Kress, who gives Roff a chance to get very rich. From here Roff's world grows perilous, then utterly mad, and finally deadly. A fascinating tale, difficult to put down, and one could only wish that Roff were a bit less naive and compliant.

Elizabeth Travis, formerly advertising copywriter and *Reader's Digest* editor, offers her first novel, *Deadlines* (St. Martin's, $17.95), an Eighties version of the Sixties gothic. Sally Templeton, marriage in ruins, established herself in California as an advertising-account executive. But now her wealthy and beloved grandmother is drifting into senile dementia, and Sally returns to Granny's Connecticut estate with questions. Questions first about her mother, who ran away when Sally was five—and then questions about Granny, her strange variations in alertness, her medications. And questions about Philip, her brother, and the demons that pursue him. This is a pleasant tale of its type, with leisurely pace, mostly conversation and introspection, and with a gratifying absence of had-I-but-known.

In another first novel, *Deerlover* by E. H. Creeth (Foul Play, $14.95), professor of English at the University of Michigan, a man takes his atheism and mania to their awful conclusion. Robinson Jay is appalled by the slaughter of deer, so during the annual hunt in Michigan he travels the backwoods, bagging one hunter a day. And, since his objective is maximum discouragement of hunting, he advertises his accomplishments through a newspaper reporter, while the police mobilize against him and he involves himself also in the terrors of a small-town prostitute. Very tense, very graphic in portrayal of terrain and central characters, but a bit unsure at the very end.

Also a first novel is *The Eyes of a Stranger* by Jackie Hyman (St. Martin's, $17.95). Here we have a chunk of the L.A. megapolis, Citrus Beach, where a girl has been taken from a local high school, strangled, and dumped in the Pa-

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cific. Shades of a case from a couple of years ago, solved with the help of a self-professed psychic, Eduardo Ranier. Ranier is still around, but the cops think he now fits the bill for suspect better than psychic sleuth. So does Diane Hanson, who reports on these matters for the local paper, knows the latest victim, and knows the next one even better. The police seem to be getting nowhere, while a tormented mind bubbles away with maddened and bloody schemes. A story slow to get going, though it moves well later on. But most of the characters have little depth.

That certainly can't be said about the people in yet another first novel, *Unquiet Grave* by Janete LaPierre, also published by St. Martin's ($15.95), which seems hospitable indeed to first novelists. This is a very strong maiden effort, with sharply caught, sympathetic characters, intriguing relationships, and a good Northern California setting. Again women are being attacked. One a few years ago; she was just raped. Now another, raped and murdered. She was a computer genius, daughter of a wealthy local entrepreneur, student of Joe Mancuso at the local college. Police of Port Silva are short of clues, but Mancuso is certainly on their suspect list. A vagabond young woman, Cat Smith, lives in a cabin on Joe's property, his guest after he rescued her from a beating. She's a member of a rock band called Animal Fare, which could also provide both suspects and victims. LaPierre is a writer to watch.

One final first novel for this column: *The House of Blue Lights* (St. Martin's, $15.95) by Robert J. Bowman, a freelance San Francisco writer. Cassandra Thorpe, once San Francisco public defender, is now doing a bit of unofficial investigating while awaiting a nice peaceful probate law practice in Santa Rosa. She's having difficulty extricating herself from the affairs of the city's derelicts. Like Sherman Tuttle, paranoid, flailing about with felt-tip pens by the dozens. Or a former bar owner, who was burned to death in a wino park thirteen years ago but who now seems miraculously to have returned to claim a treasure rumored to be buried beneath his bar. Add the odd psychotic and the mobster who runs the city's drug business and you have the leaven of Cassandra's life. Interesting, but rather frantic and unmemorable despite all the color.

Malcolm McClintick's second mystery novel is *The Key* (Doubleday, $12.95). I missed his first *(Mary's Grave)*, a mistake, I now think.

Key takes place in Clairmont City, somewhere in the wintry Midwest. Judge Boller's wife walks their dog one evening across their snowy backyard. She's shot to death, at close range, with no footprints to show for the killer and no motive to account for the corpse. The judge is not very cooperative, leading a policeman like Sergeant George Kelso to wonder what lies below the simon-pure judicial surface, to wonder if the wrong person was killed. A taut puzzler, this, with a number of good characters.

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Reid Bennett, only policeman in Murphy's Harbour in Ontario, makes his fourth appearance in *Corkscrew* (Scribners, $14.95) by Ted Wood. This one is largely confrontation and violence, as a gang of bikers invades Bennett's town. But the death of a twelve-year-old boy seems an unrelated tragedy, and Reid's suspension from duty by an officious idiot over Bennett's first intersection with the cyclists badly complicates an already precarious situation. Crisp narrative, with good drive, though somewhat less involving than previous novels.

The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1987, edited by Edward D. Hoch (Walker, $17.95), is an uncommonly rich serving of short tales, accompanied by the usual valuable summary of the year's best novels, of story collections and anthologies, of awards and deaths in the field. The 13 stories are selected from seven different sources. Varied are the settings (different parts of the U.S., England, Ireland, and the Middle East), varied are the types (impossible crime, suspense, puzzle, private eye, and others), but high is the standard—including an Edgar nominee and the year's Edgar winner, and a nominee and winner from this magazine's Readers Award poll.

I've had a little trouble swallowing the relationship between mobster Sweets Romano and newspaperwoman Julie Hayes in the series by Dorothy Salisbury Davis. In *The Habit of Fear* (Scribners, $17.95), Romano is quite in the background, and the story of Julie's brutal rape and its wretched aftermaths and her quest for the father she never knew is subtle, probing, evocative storytelling. Julie's husband comes home one day to say the marriage is over, he loves someone else. Julie runs blindly from their home, into the clutches of a pair of animals. The threads of this—the identification and pursuit of the rapists—and Julie's sudden need for knowledge of her father come finally together in Ireland.

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a *NEW* Jim Quark story by

ROBERT TWOHY

"I have vodka and beer at home," Edward said, "but would you like a nice bottle of wine?" Lily smiled like that was an adorable thought—guys liked to buy wine, it made them feel suave and knowledgeable. Edward slid out of the car and Lily lay back, lit up, and let her mind stroll.

There were plenty of motels handy but Edward had asked her home. So chemistry might be working, which had happened for her a few times with guys, a one-nighter stretching into an affair, major or minor. And the way Edward looked at her, he had more in mind than just the usual.

Robert Twohy's short fictions aren't morality tales so much as cautionary tales. Read and enjoy—read and be warned. When an acquaintance, old or new, strains your sense of safety, get out. It is part of Robert Twohy's sleight and sight that you never sense disbelief in what he is telling you . . .

HIGHWAY GIRL

by ROBERT TWOHY

In the lot by the new P.D., northwest corner of town, a detective named Phil Evans was pumping his old Tempest and getting lousy sounds—then a complete *klunk*, then nothing.

Trudging into the coffee room, he laid out the situation in six words, and was anyone heading south? He lived in the big complex back from State Drive, midway between Fairway and downtown.

Gene Roth said he'd be southbound right after the sports segment on the *10 O'Clock News* unless Evans was in a hurry. Evans said no, took a chair, and, along with Roth and others, waited for the ball scores . . .

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Six miles south, across El Camino from Sears, a medium-sized young woman was eyeing northbound cars with her thumb cocked and lips parted in a little smile that seemed to pose the question, *Want me?*

She wore a loose yellow sweater, pale-blue jeans, grey sneakers, and moderate makeup. From her left shoulder hung a floppy brown bag. She had green eyes and light-brown hair.

A tan Colt, on its rear license frame the logo of a Pasadena dealer, eased to the curb alongside her, door opening. Tossing her cigarette, she paused to bend and peer at the driver for three or four seconds, then with a grin hopped in.

He was about her age, twenty-five, with smooth dark hair, a broad brow and a good chin, straight nose, grey-blue eyes. His green jacket was quality, as were the black shoes and the rest of his clothes.

Putting the Colt into the flow he asked, "Whither bound?"—a jaunty opener that went with his voice.

She murmured, "Sort of out for the evening, you might say."

"Splendid." His teeth were another plus. "My situation, too."

He drove a few blocks, got her name (Lily), and said he was Edward—pronouncing it *Edwud*—Clarey. She asked, "Are you English?"

"Ah—the accent, you mean. Trying to lose it, but obviously not yet."

Accents can be phony—names, too, though a phony last name tends to be Jones, Brown, White. She went by feelings and from him got only good ones. From her sweater pocket, she brought a fairly flat pack of Marlboros which she wagged. He shook his head. She asked would it bother him? "Not a bit," he said, "if you crack your window."

How long had he been in the States?

"Almost two years. I'm with B.A.L. at the airport—that's British Airways Limited." Pilot? "No, I'm afraid not. Just a man at a desk."

Passing Third Avenue on the light, he told her he lived in El Granada, which she knew was a stylish town north of Half Moon, fifteen miles west over the coast range.

"I have a balcony with a rather nice ocean view—would you like to?" he asked.

"Go there?" How strong was his urge for her, and for how long, she'd better find out now. "There's no bus back from the coast this late."

"I'll drive you home in the morning." She got a soft poke in the

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hip, glanced, and her heart bounced—his near hand held two $100s. One would have pleased her.

Unzipping her bag, she tucked them into her coin purse, then, laying her head back, blew smoke as the soft June breeze diddled her light-brown hair.

They were in the next town north. Rubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray, she mentioned that she was low.

He nodded, went on a mile, turned right on Fairway, and in the second block angled into a space directly across from Perry's Liquors. To his left were two empty spaces, then a Yellow cab.

Lily recognized the driver sprawled midway in the seat, gazing down at a book or whatever—Jim Quark, who she'd got to know a little on her night rounds.

If he happened to be in a coffee shop when she entered, or vice-versa, they'd chat about this and that—weather, traffic, cops, some foolishness in the news or on TV, the Giants. Three times he'd driven her home, saying it was on his way so no charge. She'd not asked him in and he'd not suggested it—if something was going to develop, it would as it would, in its own time.

When the Colt pulled in, Quark raised his head to see if it was someone he knew. His glance bounced off the driver, not reaching Lily. His book for that Saturday night was *Great New Orleans Murders*. A crime fan, he got from the library mostly mystery novels and historical crime studies.

Lily made getting-out moves, expecting Edward to stop her, which he did. "I have vodka and beer at home, but would you like a nice bottle of wine?" She smiled like that was an adorable thought—guys liked to buy wine, it made them feel suave and knowledgeable. Edward slid out and Lily, after a glance at Quark's downturned profile, lay back, lit up, and let her mind stroll.

There were plenty of motels handy but Edward had asked her home. So chemistry might be working, which had happened for her a few times with guys, a one-nighter stretching into an affair, major or minor. And the way Edward looked at her, he had more in mind than just the usual—

Sudden dark stuff came flooding, sinking all the good thoughts. She whispered, "What?"

Came a voice from somewhere, *Too much.*

That was it, the hard truth. Looks, money, clothes, style—he had it all. Put him into any fancy bodyshop and inside an hour he'd walk

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out with the primest young body in the dump—so why was he cruising El Camino for medium goods like her?

Because nobody notices or cares who picks up a highway girl.

Two hundred dollars—why?

So you'd be happy to go wherever. He'll take it back and you won't know or care.

WOMAN'S BODY FOUND ON BEACH. Or up in the hills. Or stretched out out on some country lane. Every few months comes a headline like that in the North Peninsula paper. Lily kept sober and watchful and at night said a prayer that she wouldn't end up like one of those girls on the wrong corner at the wrong moment when the wrong guy pulled up.

Feelings. When they hit you hard, you don't debate—you grab up your bag and get moving.

Finding the doorhandle, she was out. Three quick steps and her left toes rammed the curb. Down she went.

Pulling her right knee under, she was up in a crouch, gazing down left at the toes of brown workshoes, then up corduroy pants and canvas jacket to a nonstylish face with brown eyes bent down at her. "You okay, Lily?"

She mumbled, "Take me somewhere."

Scooping up her bag, which he slung on a shoulder, he had her up and moving to the cab. Her left knee twinged, but not too bad, her left toes the same. Her palms were scraped, but not bloody. She was okay—Quark had her and she was fine.

Shutting her in the front seat, he started around, her bag still on his shoulder. Rounding the left headlight, he stopped as the slim, good-looking driver of the tan Colt paced up alongside the cab, stared in at Lily, and piped, "What? What's going on?"

Nothing she could explain. Punching the door-lock button, she rolled up the window.

His eyes were wide, bewildered—then they went thin and hot. Stepping forward, he slammed the window with his flat right hand.

Quark called, "No." The man gaped at him. Quark shook his head.

The man hefted a paper sack. "I got her cigarettes and some wine—" He stopped and gave a stringy sort of laugh. "How can you figure them? Everything seemed great—now what?"

Lily was gazing ahead. Quark shook his head that he didn't know.

The man took some breaths, got his face organized. "Well. So it goes, huh?" Setting the sack on the hood, he said briskly, "Two

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hundred-dollar bills. In her bag you have there, in the coin purse—or that's where she put them." A palm stretched at Quark.

Quark looked at Lily, who with her window up hadn't heard clearly but guessed what Edward wanted and nodded.

Quark asked, "Why's she scared?"

"Ask *her*. But right now, just give me my money and I'll be out of her life." His smile was expectant.

Quark got out the coin purse, unsnapped it, and fingered the two bills. "She stole this?"

"No, no—I gave it to her, an advance." Edward's smile was a little tight. "Give it to me, please?"

Quark's expression had changed. His eyes had got dull and muddy and his bottom lip hung. Rubbing it with a finger, he mumbled, "Maybe I should radio in, have them send a cop."

"*What?*"

"Yeah—maybe a cop could straighten it out."

"Straighten *what* out?" Wide white eyes like he couldn't believe this. "It's my money—look at her, she's nodding!"

Quark looked and Lily was, also pointing from the coin purse to the man.

Quark frowned like that still left problems too tricky for him to handle on his own. Dropping the bills back into the coin purse and it back in the bag, he started for his door.

The man gave a shrill yelp, ducked, and darted to the Colt, fired it up and lit it, sliced it back, and was gone down Fairway.

Quark threw himself and Lily's bag into the cab. She was out, grabbing Edward's paper sack from the hood and scrambling back in as Quark rammed the cab into reverse, then after the Colt.

Lily cried, "Whadaryou doing?"

Hunched forward, mouth set, brown eyes clear and shiny, he didn't say.

Three blocks ahead, the Colt swung right on State, a semi-fast route to the downtown of this town, then on into San Mateo. Quark had to slow for a truck crossing Fairway.

His radio drawled, "Forty-nine, you conscious?"

Scooping the mike to his mouth, he barked, "Street pickup! Forty-nine over and out!" One move hooked the mike and cut the radio.

In the center lane on State, he passed some cars but no tan Colt and didn't see one ahead. The streets to the right led back to El Camino. He got right and eased over to the curb.

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Lily put it to him again. "Why did you chase him?"

Quark shrugged. "I said cops and he ran, leaving his two hundred." He cut the lights and the motor.

"Why'd you say cops?"

"I wanted to see what he'd do."

"What made you think he'd do anything?"

"I didn't think—just played a feeling. Why were you scared?"

She sighed. "I was playing a feeling, too. He was too much—good clothes, smooth style, slick English accent—"

"I didn't hear any accent."

"No, he lost it."

He was frowning at her. She said, "What?"

"I dunno—nothing, probably." He looked off, murmured, "British accent, picks up a highway girl, runs when I say cops. —Did he give you a name?"

"Edward Clarey."

He closed his eyes, was quiet a few beats. Then, staring at her, "Where'd he pick you up?" She said where. "Where was he taking you?" She told him.

He slumped back and folded his hands on the steering wheel. "The way to Granada is up Nineteenth, or Third, or Castle Drive. He was taking you the long way, back along the beach, or up through the hills." He lolled back, slumpy and still, eyes half mast and three quarters stupid, gazing at nothing.

Poking into Edward's sack, she snaked out two packs of Marlboros, one for her sweater pocket, the other into her bag. "Like Mondavi claret?" Quark turned his muddy eyes at the bottle she showed and nodded. "It's yours," she said. "I get the cigarettes and the two hundred we split." She held him a bill, which he slid into his breast pocket. "Fantasy time," she said softly.

"What's that mean?"

"Good question. Whose fantasy—his or mine?"

Suddenly he jerked, slammed right fist into left palm, and threw himself straight at the wheel, all sharp eyes and energy. Flipping the lights, he got the cab moving. Lily yiked, "What now?"

"A phonebooth. I'd tell Charlie to call but he'd ask too many questions." She guessed Charlie was the dispatcher. "Quicker if I call him." Who? "A cop I know—if he's on. He might get the point if there is one, put word out on the Colt. Phil Evans, know him?"

"No." Lily got along with cops, moved on when they said, stayed out of their face. "Call him and I'm gone."

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"No way. Without you there's—" His jaw dropped and his eyes were big and starey.

Lily jerked front and saw at the curb a red coplight behind a tan car that a thin cop was strolling back from.

Quark yelled, "Hang on!" Lily had nothing to hang onto and fell back as he stood on the gas. Two seconds later, on her right, she got a blur of cop car and tan car, cop face and Edward face, then was flung atop Quark, who yelled, "Grab!" She did, with hands, arms, and knees, and they stopped cold.

She was all over him, everything in his lap but her feet. Peeling her off, he cut motor and lights, threw her a grin, and was gone.

She shook her head and it stopped swirling. Twisting right, she was hit in the eye by headlights and saw that Quark had sliced the cab in front of the tan car and blocked it. The cop car was tight on its rear.

Quark was standing off to right front and a big man in a Goodwill-type grey suit was out of the cop car and lumping toward him. With a grin all over his face, Quark said, "Whadaya know? Phil Evans himself, the very dude!"

The thin cop Lily had glimpsed in the blur stood a few feet off. Quark started talking fast, with some gestures her way and at the Colt, but Lily couldn't hear him. Rolling down her window, she got his tone and a word here and there but no connection.

Headlights went out of her right eye. Twisting all the way, she saw the shape of Edward behind the wheel, but glare on the windshield gave him no face.

She switched back right front and for a minute or so watched Quark make words and the big man return some. Then curiosity fought her urge to stay on the sidelines and won. Wanting no big entrance, she skooched across and out Quark's door, moving two thirds along and stopping to hear him say, "It gave him a kick, maybe, to give her his name, but for all he knew she might know it so he wasn't going to give her all of it."

Phil Evans' profile was a straight vertical from grey hairline to chin, a short nose stuck on midway. Rubbing a meaty cheek with a large paw, he gazed at Quark with a hoody blue eye and growled, "You're just guessing."

"Uh huh. But I've seen plenty of cases where guys get caught up in fantasy games and lose control."

"You're guessing this man was into a fantasy game."

"Details hang together, Phil. Edward Clarey, with a British ac-

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cent, picks up a highway girl, runs when I say cops. And what's he doing now?" He threw a glance at the tan car. "Just sitting, doesn't want to come out though he knows I'm talking about him."

"So you want us to search."

"Uh huh. Because that could be why he ran—afraid of cop questions, one thing leading to another, maybe to a search of his car he doesn't want."

The big man made a sour noise, looked gloomy, then walked around, fiddling with a jowl and scowling at his big feet.

From this new angle, Lily had a clear shot of Edward's face under glass—greyish, blotchy circles around the eyes, mouth a grim line, looking nothing like the smooth charmer who had loped away to get cigarettes and a nice bottle of wine.

Evans stopped walking. "No tickets, no warrants—his record was clear."

"*Was!* Now he has a speeding ticket Roth gave him two minutes after he ran from me!" Quark looked at the thin cop. "When did he say he'd come up from Pasadena?"

"Yesterday," the thin cop said.

"Did he say why?"

"He had the weekend off through Monday and came up to do the City."

Quark looked at Evans. "So he drives four hundred miles, checks into a motel in San Carlos, and Saturday night he's not doing the City but cruising El Camino, picking up a highway girl and giving her two hundred bucks to come with him to El Granada, the long way." He left the comment hanging and watched Evans, as did the cop, whose name was apparently Roth.

Evans worked his mouth a while, then nodded at Roth, who turned and took two steps, knocked a knuckle on the window that Lily had opened a crack, and motioned the man to come out.

Lily glanced around and saw no sidewalk gawkers, State not being a strolling street, but in a doorway a man and a woman gawked and in some near windows were heads with big eyes.

Edward's eyes looked small and deep in the blotchy patches and he licked his good teeth. Evans said, "This cab driver says you gave that girl there two hundred dollars and ran when he said cops."

"A lie." Edward sounded tinny and unreal. "I gave her nothing. I didn't like her and changed my mind, told her to get out."

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Evans looked at Roth, who shook his head like this was a new one for him, too, A denying B's statement that A had money coming.

Quark said, "Did you—", then glanced at Evans, who nodded that he should go on. "Did you tell her you were taking her to El Granada?"

"I don't know any El Granada. I'm staying at the Twenty-five Motel in San Carlos—as I told him." He nodded at Roth. "I live in Pasadena, as my license proves."

"Did you tell her you were Edward Clarey?"

"My name is Lloyd B. Harris, as my license proves."

"Did you put on an English accent for her?"

"Another lie of hers."

Quark and the cops watched him, and there was dead time—which Lily was startled that her own voice broke. "Did you say you worked for B.A.L.?"

He gave that stringy laugh from earlier. "That's just stupid—there's no such airline."

Which hung heavy in the cool night air. He didn't say anything for a while and nobody else did, either. Then he blew a sigh and murmured, "Not a bright remark, was it? Sorry." He rubbed his forehead. "I'm not really up for this, not at my best." He smiled in a worn way at Evans. "Can I ask what you want, sir—what I'm charged with?"

"Nothing. But I'd like permission to search your car."

"What do you have in mind?"

"A knife."

Edward dipped in a pocket and held out a small, plain pocket knife. "Like this?"

Evans said, "No, I'm thinking more of a big knife, like a kitchen knife—a carving knife."

Edward licked his lips. "Is there a law against having one in your car?"

"Not particularly. Do you have one?"

"I might."

"Where in the car, please?"

"You might try the back seat, on the right."

Evans nodded at Roth, who moved toward the back seat and opened the door.

Edward's gaze went to Quark. He said, not hostile, "You put this together from the name? Are you a true-crime fan?" Quark nodded.

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"Well, there was no crime, and wouldn't have been." He gazed off, said softly, "Though who really knows at the time?"

Quark's voice was just as soft. "Knows what, Eddie?"

"Eddie? No, I'm Lloyd Harris—I clerk at Behring's Warehouse in Pasadena." He rubbed his jaw, looked puzzled. "Though am I Lloyd with no power or Edward with power to hurt, or not to hurt? And if I'm Edward, will I go through with it, or stop the game short of the point of it?" He smiled at Quark. "Nobody knows at the time. Maybe that's the point—the excitement, not knowing how it'll end."

"Who's Edward?" Lily put her question.

Nobody answered as Roth came out of the back seat with a long knife held by the point, beatup and crummy-looking, the eight-inch blade nicked and bent at the tip and elsewhere, stained as black as the painted handle. He swung it up horizontal, a thumb under the handle.

"This yours, Lloyd?" Evans asked.

Lloyd said to Roth, "May I?" He touched the blade with a finger and said softly, "Isn't it something? Isn't it like you always pictured it?" He was smiling at Quark.

Quark said, "Pretty close." Lloyd nodded like pleased.

Evans signaled that he'd seen enough of the knife for now and Roth took it to the black-and-white. "You're parked okay?" Evans said. "Key in the ignition?" Lloyd nodded. "Then we'll lock it up and leave it as it is—tomorrow's Sunday, so no problem."

"Are we going somewhere?"

"To the station, to talk. Afterward you can sleep there."

"I'm extremely tired," Lloyd said.

Quark asked, "D'you want us?"

"You're not charging him with anything, are you?"

Quark looked at Lily, who shook her head.

"He's not under arrest," Evans told them. "I'll just check some points with him. Call me in a few days."

Lloyd was wobbly. Evans got him aimed at the cruiser and Roth took him, tucked him in back, and closed the door. Evans went to the Colt for the keys and to lock it, came back, and got in next to Roth.

Quark and Lily stood watching. Lloyd must have lain down or fallen on the seat. They couldn't see him.

Roth turned at the corner to head for El Camino and north.

Lily asked, "Who's Edward?"

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Quark said he needed coffee and over it he would fill her in.

She almost said something but got quietly into the cab instead.

He got it lit up and moving, turned on the radio, picked up the mike, thumbed the send button, and said, "Forty-nine."

"How decent of you." Irony on a lead shovel. "Last word from you was a street pickup. Where'd it go, or is that private information I'm not entitled to?"

"False rumor, call it a no-go."

"We'll hash that lie out later. Pickup at Bimley Hotel on Fourth, Joe Pinglethorn."

"Scratch me for Joe," Quark said. "I've got a flat, possibly two. Forty-nine going out of service." He hung up and cut the radio, smiled at Lily, and eased into the left lane for the donut-shop turn.

Lily decided his checking out added up to a nudge and said, "I have coffee at home—also half an apple pie, which I'm pretty good at."

Things develop as they do, in their own time. A car blatted behind. Quark moved across the intersection and stayed on State to Poplar, where he hove east for Lily's apartment.

That night for a while, and next morning over a good breakfast she fixed, he told her how the name Edward Clarey had triggered thoughts of Edward, Duke of Clarence, older son of Edward, Prince of Wales, and grandson of Victoria and Albert.

He gave her the story of the Duke of Clarence that included five, maybe six murders of prostitutes—which, he said, was pure speculation based on fragments of evidence.

Lily, freshening their coffee, murmured, "So Lloyd thought he was the Duke."

"Or played a game that he was."

She looked at him hard. "Was he going to kill me?"

"He said he didn't know how the game would end—which could be a lie."

Lily took her coffee to the window and looked out at the blue morning. "I want to go up in the hills and just look at it—the ocean, the sky, the birds, the traffic, the trash, the beer cans. Just sit there and know it's there, and me, too."

He went and held her and they felt good at the start of the bright Sunday. Chemistry had done a number on them.

Quark tells me about involvements he gets into in the cabs, which

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sometimes I turn into stories. This one I've reshaped so it's mostly through Lily's eyes, but the gist is what he gave me.

I wrote it to this point. He read it and frowned and said I'd left out all that Evans told him about Lloyd. I said I'd get it in toward the end, which is nigh.

Evans couldn't fit Lloyd into any stabbings or other violence in the Bay Area. Other detectives couldn't in their areas. Some possibilities showed up down south, but none could be brought home to Lloyd.

Some psychiatrists had a go at him. He told them that his father was diseased by a prostitute shortly before his birth, which disease he had inherited and it went up into his brain. That story matched historical speculations as to the Duke of Clarence.

The crummy knife was tested and its black stains were rust, grease, and human blood—not a lot, but some. Evans put that to Lloyd, who said he found it in a dumpster somewhere and didn't clean it as he thought it looked great as it was. Just right for the Duke game. Other times he said he didn't know where he'd got it, or that he ever had got it—somebody could have planted it in his car.

Evans, down the line, got word from somewhere that Lloyd's father lived in L.A. and had a detective there talk to him. Melvin Harris said he'd never got diseased by a prostitute, but wasn't surprised Lloyd had said so as he'd been telling weird stories since he was a teenager, when he got deep into dope. He was also deep into British royal history—he spread around that he was of royal blood, kidnaped by brigands and held captive by Melvin. Sometimes he'd giggle that it was a joke, sometimes he'd mutter it was true, he knew because his blood told him.

A few swatches of British royal history: Victoria died and her son, the Prince of Wales, became Edward VII. The Duke of Clarence would have moved up to the Wales slot but was dead, so his younger brother, George, got it, positioning him as next king. The Duke had died in an asylum, maybe poisoned, as a bunch of VIPs weren't hot to have him eventually become Edward VIII, knowing what they may have about him.

Melvin Harris said he'd never been able to figure if Lloyd was a straight-on mental case or a gameplayer. As to whether he had ever savaged a prostitute, he didn't know and didn't want to. If they thought they should put Lloyd away for treatment, it was okay by

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him—maybe that's what the kid had been begging for all his messed-up life.

Which might have been astute, or merely a father wanting to be rid of a problem son. But nobody coming up with solid reasons why not, Lloyd went to a hospital in Southern California, where he is now.

How about the $200, I asked Quark. He said he'd asked Evans, who said Lloyd continued to deny it, so it was Quark's and Lily's as far as Evans was concerned—and, anyway, Lloyd was flush because Evans, needing new wheels, gave him $1,500 cash and took over payments on the Colt.

I reached this point in the story and Quark showed up at my place and said I should put on a clean shirt, as he'd hit a football pool for $300-plus and we were going to Paco Gomez, which is the best Mexican eatery in the three towns we're the center of. I go there when an affluent condition coincides with my off-and-on yen for Mexican, or when I get treated. We went in style, by cab.

There was the usual crowd and we sat a while, mariachi rhythms putting us in the right mood for spice. Then a considerably pretty miss in a Mexican-type formal with a big red flower in her light-brown hair came over with a smile and said she had a table for us, and proved it. Quark murmured that he'd pick her up later at the usual time, and her green eyes were warm as she nodded.

During dinner, I learned that Evans had mentioned that the manager of Paco Gomez was looking for a hostess, and, if interested, Lily should see him. She was, did, he liked her and hired her, no references needed beyond Evans.

Since her big night with Edward Clarey, two dead women have been found in the north county—one on the coast south of Half Moon, one in the hills of LaHonda. Neither has been identified yet and may never be.

Maybe they weren't highway girls, maybe they were. It's a high-risk business, which Lloyd Harris of Pasadena, playing the Duke game if he was, scared Lily out of, maybe saving her life.

We raised a cup to Edward, Duke of Clarence, who may or may not have been Jack the Ripper. Nobody knows for sure or ever will.

"Q"

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When a man has been happy in marriage, he is vulnerable. When a man is convalescing from an illness, he is doubly so. And when a man is believed to be well off, he should take care. Norton knew all this now. But at the time, the attentions of Ellen seemed such a balm to the spirit, filled such a terrible vacuum . . .

SUBPLOT

by JEAN McCONNELL

"Yes, we're burying her tomorrow morning," said Belfrage.

"Were you very close to her?"

I was only making conversation. Or rather extending it. Nobody could say Belfrage was a scintillating talker, but I valued these brief chats.

"Oh, no. She wasn't that well liked. Mind you, the family converged near the end."

"That was decent."

"She had a bob or two."

"Ah, well—"

"You what? You never saw wrangling like it."

"Nothing divides a family like a common sorrow."

Maggie, behind the bar, shot me a glance. Belfrage flowed on. "Would you believe we can't find the old girl's will?"

"Oh, dear."

"Had the place upside down. Solicitors don't have it. Wife's there now, having another search. She was her favorite niece. She says."

"Frustrating."

"You're right. Maggie! Same again, love. I'd like there to be something. Not for myself, you know. But it would be nice for the wife. She never complains, bless her."

Maggie served us. "Perhaps she has nothing to complain about," she remarked.

Belfrage acknowledged this as a compliment.

Maggie pushed me my glass. "And how is *your* wife, Mr. Norton?"

On certain days, Maggie enjoyed knifing the wounds of husbands

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who were only too aware they had made a bad choice. She had comprehended my situation within a couple of weeks of my moving into the neighborhood. Perhaps I had given signals. Such as when there was talk of closing the Feathers for repairs and I had protested so strongly. Or when she'd caught me checking my watch so frequently as it drew near eight o'clock.

Belfrage had paused only to take a pull at his beer.

"How are they getting on with the grave then?"

I was startled.

"You came across the churchyard, didn't you? Have they finished it? You'd not miss it. Family plot. Seddon. Right by the pathway. Have they done it?"

"Ah! Yes. There was one. Rusty had a scratch there. Oh, sorry!"

"Don't fret, lad. Aunt Mercy loved animals. Mice anyroad—house was full of them."

We all laughed.

"Time I was off." I tugged at Rusty's lead.

"Doesn't want to go home," said Belfrage, then stopped abruptly and stooped down to tousle the dog's head.

"See you tomorrow," said Maggie. Her mood had softened to normal.

"Same time. Same place," quipped Belfrage.

"Yes. Goodnight all."

I left him silhouetted against the rosy glow of the bar.

Only twenty-three hours to get through.

Seddon. I shone my torch on the headstones. Amelia Seddon. William Seddon. Grace Seddon. Nearby, a freshly dug trench with planks across it.

William Seddon's tomb was topped with an urn. Moss clung to the crumbling stone. Beautiful. Anne had loved old churchyards. We had strolled in many, reading the quaint words, puzzling out the Latin, touched by the tiny graves. We never found them mournful.

I had buried Anne in a hallowed acre by the shore. It was far away. Time and ivy must by now have softened the lines of her stone.

When a man has been happy in marriage, he is vulnerable. When a man is convalescing from an illness, he is doubly so. And when a man is believed to be well off, he should take care.

I knew all this now. But at the time, the attentions of Ellen seemed such a balm to the spirit, filled such a terrible vacuum.

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It had taken such a short time to go wrong. Perhaps only as long as it took me to recover from my emotional and physical shocks. And for Ellen to discover that my financial position was only modest.

At first, it had been mere misgivings. I had thought it natural enough when the house was changed throughout. Then, this done, and every trace of Anne disposed of, the demand to move to the southern end of the country. It had meant taking an early retirement for me, but that didn't seem important if Ellen would be happy. Indeed, Anne and I had often thought of Brighton in this respect. But where Anne had seen cast-iron balconies, Ellen saw only candy floss.

So we had settled in a quiet, respectable village in Kent. Leaving my friends had been less of a wrench than it might have been, because Ellen had not cared for them and ties had already been broken.

But slowly it came home to me that Ellen was one whom there was no pleasing. The friends were not replaced. Acquaintances might be made, but always Ellen would ferret out some Achilles heel and expose it. She could not expect to be loved for this, and she wasn't. "If people can't stand the truth," she would say in reply to my protests.

We seemed to spend more and more of our time alone together, while emotionally we grew further and further apart. With Ellen, the act of love was clinical as a diagram in a sex manual. I am one who finds no pleasure if the woman is not satisfied. With Anne, we had constantly delighted each other afresh. Anne, so sweetly flushed, who would lie calm in my arms. Ellen, who made straight for the bathroom as if to wash all trace of me from her body. Did I not assuage her? Perhaps I simply aroused her without fulfilment, so that she needed to comfort herself alone. But she denied this. And the question no longer arose, since all manifestations of love had ceased between us.

It was ironic that although Ellen seemed to find me increasingly aggravating in everything I did, she insisted that I stay near and was only in some measure content when I was doing repairs about the place under her supervision.

Perhaps I am somewhat inept as a handyman. All I know is that Anne's encouragement and aid from the bottom of a ladder had been more productive than Ellen's relentless criticism. And if the job required a craftsman, so much the worse. This invariably led to unpleasant situations. Ellen treated everyone with suspicion and

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distrust, while she herself was capable of a sharpness that bordered on dishonesty.

I am not a man who loses his temper easily—at least on the outside. Perhaps I should have done. I should have stopped Ellen's nonsense long ago. Maybe it was a challenge, stemming from insecurity. A completely unjustified insecurity. How had she misread my character so completely? I suppose she needed a firm hand. But all I had to offer was a gentle touch. It had been all that Anne had wanted.

God knows I'm not insensitive. I had been willing to bury the dead and live for the living. But in one matter I had stood firm. Rusty. He had not been Anne's dog especially, but Ellen lumped him together with my first marriage and had made every effort to get rid of him. This I would not allow. And in time I was more than glad I had not given in. His trusting eye and affectionate presence had become almost my sole joy in the home. And his need for exercise served as a valid reason for me leaving the house twice a day alone.

Rusty's morning run on the common did not arouse great comment since Ellen was still in bed at that time. But my evening walk, though it was simply down the garden, out of the gate, across the churchyard, and along the lane to the pub, where I stayed no more than an hour, was the subject of many a bad scene.

What Ellen imagined I was up to in that quiet country hostelry, I had no idea. It seemed enough that it was a pleasure to me.

Pleasure was not really the word. Haven.

Rusty was no youngster and took his time about most things these days. My torch rested on him. He was ankle-deep in the soft earth of Aunt Mercy's pit, kicking up a shower of clods with his back legs.

It was a chilly night, and he slipped past me when we reached home, dodged through the kitchen and into the sitting room. He left a track of pawmarks all the way to the fireplace.

It was this that started the night's row. But if not, there would have been something else. Ellen appeared in the doorway, a half eaten jellycube in her fingers. She took one a day to strengthen her nails—part of the newest of her endless health diets.

Immediately she began screaming at the dog and at me. As she advanced on him, Rusty backed into the corner, cowering away from her in confusion.

Perhaps it was the contrast of those quiet moments amongst the

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old gravestones and this hysterical display that made me rise in unaccustomed revolt. I ordered her to calm down.

She turned on me in a fury. "This is the last time that dog enters this house!"

"No, Ellen. Let's have no more of that. Don't worry about the carpet. I'll clean it."

"You didn't hear me! For the last time, I said, I'm getting rid of that animal!"

"The dog stays."

"Correction! He goes! And for good!"

At the peak of passion, she seized the heavy poker from the fireside and swung at Rusty. With all her force, she brought the weapon down on his head.

He dropped to his side and lay still as death.

The gravesoil still darkened his feet. Rusty. All I had left of the happy times. There was blood on the precious carpet now.

Ellen raised the poker again, higher this time. As she did, I grasped it from behind her and brought it straight down again—on her burnished, herbalized, permanently perfect head. Again and again. As she sank to her knees, the blows grew harder. All my disappointment in the marriage—all my pent-up resentment was channeled into my arm. I'm not an especially muscular man—a fact Ellen often dwelt on with some scorn. But she had no cause for complaint this time.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

How long was the silence afterward, I couldn't tell. Eons later, it seemed, Rusty stirred and sat up.

Ellen didn't.

I bathed the dog's head and found it was not a deep wound. I gave him half an aspirin in warm milk. This done, I went to the telephone. Ellen was dead. I supposed it was the police I should ring.

We should have parted. She should have left me long since. What force of nature had kept us on this collision course? Now I had destroyed her. And by this she would destroy me. I lifted the receiver. Ellen would have the last word again.

I paused. It had been a very satisfying experience to defeat Ellen for once. It was unfortunate that it had involved killing her. I tried to feel some remorse, but there was nothing but a lightness within me. The whole house seemed airier, sweeter.

Rusty whined to be let out. I strolled down the garden with him. The stars glittered. Over the fence the pleasing grave ornaments

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were outlined against the dark yews. An owl called. I brushed against the rosemary bush. And the lavender. A moth fluttered up.

The night was alive with soft sounds. Creatures hunting. Killing. Being killed. And in the undergrowth small carcasses being eaten, drawn down, buried, tidied away. No panic. No retribution.

I got the wheelbarrow out of the shed, and a spade. I left the spade by the gate and took the barrow in through the back door.

Chocolate-brown blankets had been a recent addition to the bedroom. Ellen had thought them smart. I had thought them rather depressing. "And they're a practical color," she had argued. She was right again. One was enough for my purpose. Ellen had never allowed an ounce of spare flesh to settle on her. I could appreciate that now.

As I wrapped her up and got her settled into the wheelbarrow, my thoughts raced ahead. I could see advantages at last in Ellen's inability to keep friends. Who would notice her absence? Or if they did, who would be greatly concerned? Her parents were long dead. And there were no relatives who kept in touch.

Now I would clean the carpet. There was time enough. Cold water for bloodstains. A cookery book yielded this useful tip. The pawmarks might do better left till they dried. They would brush off easily enough in the morning.

Two hours later, I shut Rusty in the house and wheeled the barrow down the path. At the gate, I picked up the spade and balanced it on top of my load.

The night was blacker now. I found Aunt Mercy's plot with quick flashes of my torch. I would ration the beams to essentials. In any case, my eyes were already adjusting to the dark. I must work as fast as I could.

I lifted out the swathed bundle, laid it nearby in the long grass, and wheeled the barrow several yards away. Then I removed the planks and lowered myself into the grave.

It took me longer than I had expected to dig down about a foot, the minimum I required. It would have to serve. There already seemed a hint of dawn in the distance.

I planted the body and firmed it down, then shoveled a sprinkling of soil over the top. The depth seemed much the same as it had before. There were, perhaps, no more than three inches of earth covering the body, but the grave must not appear to be any shallower than it had been. True, any slight disturbance would bring the hid-

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ing place to light, but who would need to touch it? The grave was finished. Tomorrow the coffin would be lowered gently to the bottom by its webs and Aunt Mercy would conceal Ellen for the rest of time. Or long enough for me to—to what?

I returned the wheelbarrow and spade to the shed and went indoors to wash my hands. There were plans to be made. I repaired the fire and sat down. Rusty's head lay on my foot.

By daylight I had decided that if all went well I would emigrate to Australia and make a new life. I had money enough, and old friends there. I went to bed, set the alarm clock for eight, and slept.

Since I didn't know the time of the funeral, I was obliged to keep lookout from the bedroom window for two hours before I saw the cortege arriving. I trained my binoculars on the site and watched.

I could make out Belfrage with his wife leaning on his arm. There seemed a great show of mourners for one who had not been liked. When they gathered round the graveside, my view was obscured. But I saw the coffin carried over, and no sign came that anything other than a normal burial service was taking place.

At last the group began to stir. Gradually, everyone moved off, helping each other to pick their way back to the cars. The white figure of the clergyman remained a short while, then also departed.

A gravedigger appeared with a shovel and rolled up his sleeves. God. Not long now. The man completed his task with the speed of a professional.

It was all over. And not even lunchtime.

Rusty had yet to have his morning walk. His cut had crusted over cleanly. I took him across the common. I dearly longed to call in for a drink, but my pattern of behavior must not be changed yet.

But I did go that evening.

I walked through the churchyard and passed Aunt Mercy's mound, now neatly packed over and covered with wreaths. It suddenly occurred to me what a blessing it had not rained. The slightest subsidence of the meager covering of earth over Ellen's body would certainly have revealed the blanket and aroused suspicion. Such a possibility had not entered my mind at the time. I had put my faith in the slenderest chance. In the light of day I realized it was a small miracle. Anne must have been watching over me. Maybe she and Ellen had squabbled over my fate. Well, Anne had won.

Belfrage was already in the bar when I entered.

"Ah, Norton! You're two minutes late."

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There was general laughter—of a friendly nature.

Had I been so routine-bound that people told the time by me? That was all in the past now. I was finished with the ten-minutes-to-eight teas made, the five-to-one handwashing, the two-thirty-to-four silence, the four-past-five kettle-whistle, the ten-thirty clockwinding and cheerless twin-bedding.

"What's Rusty done to his head then?" asked Maggie. She missed nothing.

"He knocked over the ironing-board," I said. "Got the flatiron right on his bonce."

"Poor old chap. Give him a crisp."

"How did the funeral go, Belfrage?" I saw no harm in asking. Just touch on the subject.

"Oh, very well. Not too chilly, thank God. Good turnout. All hoping we'd got news of the will, I suppose. Hard cheese!"

"I noticed the flowers as I came through. Very nice."

"Mm. What a price these days, eh? And the headstone's costing a bomb. I told them, I said we'll have to club together on it."

"That seems fair."

Should I ask him to chip Ellen's name on the bottom?

I hadn't felt so impish for years. Not since Anne died. Anne and I could laugh at such little things. There was so much happiness, it spilt out very easily.

"My round, Belfrage. Maggie! Same, please."

I wanted her close, to hear my next remarks.

"Nip in the air today. I hope the weather holds. My wife's flying off to Australia tomorrow."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. She's got a cousin out there who's been in a bit of an accident. We got a telegram. Ellen's going off at once. I'll sort things out, then follow on. Reckon we'll stay out there for a spell. See the cousin all right, then make it a holiday, you know."

"Good idea. Summer over there, isn't it?"

"Flying off to the sun. How lovely," said Maggie.

It had registered. Splendid.

Now I could leave in a week or two, and later on when I was settled I'd write to a local estate agent and get them to dispose of the house. I'd fade from the minds of these acquaintances in due course, and if I never showed up again they wouldn't be likely to query it. Maybe I'd drop them a postcard in a month or so. Just the one.

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Belfrage lifted his glass. "Here's to poor old Aunt Mercy," he said. "May she rest in peace."

I drank to that.

The next day I went up to London to make arrangements about my flight and to inquire about a booking for Rusty. First, I went to Australia House to check up on what inoculations both of us would need, then I went to the airline office.

It seemed Rusty would be crated up and travel in the freight compartment of the same plane as me. If I gave a diet sheet, he would be watered and fed in his usual way during flight. The airplane staff would know he was aboard and inlets would be opened so he could enjoy warmth and fresh air.

My booking was accepted for three weeks ahead. This would give me time to clear up my affairs without suspicious haste and time to adjust to my role, and to circulate my story in a casual way. To be seen in a normal state of mind. And to be sure, my state of mind was more normal than it had been these several years past. My main task was not to appear abnormally untroubled. The mirror showed me a face where the furrows were fast disappearing—like a ploughed field planed by a duststorm.

I continued to make my nightly visits to the Feathers, regretting only that I was obliged to leave at a reasonably early hour. It must not seem that I took too much advantage of Ellen's absence. I had to be wary of Maggie. I caught her regarding me keenly from time to time. Whether this was the speculative eye of a warm woman who knows your wife is away or the female sixth sense of something amiss, I couldn't be sure.

I had one bad moment, and this was when Belfrage, feeding a peanut to Rusty, inquired innocently, "What's going to happen to this old lad, then?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "He'll come, too, of course." I realized just in time the mistake this would be. "Kennels," I said, adding quickly, "very good ones. He's been there before," to scotch any possibility of Belfrage offering Rusty accommodation.

"Oh. Only if you hadn't, I was going to say—"

Another hurdle over. It had to appear at this stage that I had no intention of staying in Australia. Once I had gone, then the decision to remain would be much more acceptable. I was not so well established in this area, and God knows not so fascinating a person for folk seriously to be concerned about my movements and motivations.

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How many of us are, when it comes down to it. But simple precaution was required.

As the days went by, my life took on such a calm and pleasant tenor that I sometimes looked at the tickets for Australia with regret. Then I would walk through the graveyard and know that although I had at last got the better of Ellen, she would continue to jostle with Anne for a place in my mind as long as Aunt Mercy lay nearby as a reminder. No, it was best to go far away. Anne would not blame me for leaving her earthly remains alone on that northern seashore. Her memory was alive in my heart.

The day arrived for our departure. I presented myself at the freight department with Rusty. He was to be sedated so as not to be upset by the flying. He greeted the airline staff in his trusting, friendly way and they received him with a caring attitude which gave me every confidence in his welfare. This was an even greater comfort by reason of the fact that he was to travel one flight ahead of me. It would not involve him in a long wait at the other end, but I was sorry to think he was not on the same plane. There had been an unfortunate overbooking. However, I would touch down in Sydney only a few hours after he did, and he would, I knew, be well looked after. The airline had a good reputation for transporting animals.

I chatted to the official as he consigned Rusty on his load sheet and I stayed by the dog as long as possible. Then I went home. I would use the last few hours to make sure all my arrangements were complete.

But I had dealt with matters so efficiently that there was time on my hands. I needed to check in at the terminal at eleven P.M. A last drink at the Feathers? I felt I needed to say goodbye. For one thing, I wanted to. And it would seem natural.

I bought myself a double and one for Maggie. Belfrage had not yet arrived. Time went by and I began to wonder about him. A creature of habit was Belfrage. Not, as I had been, on limited parole.

Soon I would have to go. I intended to be at the airport in good time.

The door flew open and Belfrage came rushing in. He was flushed and his eyes shone.

"Thought you might be here," he said. "Glad I didn't miss saying cheerio. Wanted you to know my news. I'm in the money! Drinks all round, Mag."

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Maggie hastened to serve Belfrage and me, herself, and an ancient person in the corner.

"What's happened?" I asked.

"Aunt Mercy's will. We found it. Slipped behind a drawer in the bureau. If there hadn't been such a load of junk everywhere— Anyway, who's a lucky girl then? My wife! Bulk of it to her. Odd bits elsewhere—enough to keep them all quiet. How about that?"

He looked so happy, I realized that it was possible this windfall would be a godsend.

"I'm very pleased. Really pleased for you." I shook his hand and Maggie leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

It was a good moment. In an hour or two I would be starting a new life. Behind me, I was leaving a man—just an acquaintance, perhaps—but a decent man who was equally enjoying a fortunate turn of circumstances.

"Maggie," said Belfrage, "since I've bent your ear on the subject of my aunt these three months, here's a little present in compensation." He produced a large box of chocolates from the depths of his raincoat.

The atmosphere was euphoric.

"I must go now," I announced at last.

"One for the road. Or should I say for the sky?" said Belfrage.

"To Aunt Mercy," I said, raising my glass high.

"Aunt Mercy!" echoed Belfrage. "Poor old soul. You'd never guess—in her will she said she wanted to be cremated!"

A pain shot through my chest.

"Oh, Lord," said Maggie, "and you buried her!" She giggled.

"Well, I ask you, who'd have thought?" said Belfrage. "With the family plot and all that."

"What will you do?" The voice didn't sound like mine.

"No choice," said Belfrage. "They're digging her up tonight."

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a *NEW* Em Grady story by

JANE BOSWORTH

"I never would have thought a woman like you would capture Jake McEwan's heart," Maria Lucia Sanchez said after giving Em's bluejeans and Pendleton shirt a quick onceover. "Oh, yes, you have," she overrode Em's objection. "You and your safety were the most important topic we discussed when he asked for my help in Las Vegas. I assure you, you have accomplished what other women have only dreamed of. You have smitten Jake."

Our favorite Em Grady story to date . . .

CLIPPIN' COYOTES

by JANE BOSWORTH

Ain't nothin' more irritatin' than a man bent on showin' his hurt by speedin' down the highway, but that's just what Jake McEwan was doin', speedin' an' poutin' because I wouldn't go dude-ranchin' with him. I told him I just can't abide animals that stink up your jeans an' blister your behind, but it didn't lessen his hurt none. I reckon Jake McEwan just ain't used to bein' turned down by a woman.

I seen the shadow of a plane cross over us, an' I stuck my head out the window to see iffen somebody up there was clockin' us on radar. Then I sat back in my seat.

"Highway Patrol?" Jake asked.

"It's just Tom," I answered. "The old bear-buster in the sky. Reckon we ought to turn on the radio an' tune into Station JABI to see iffen they's a speed trap up ahead. 'Cause iffen they is, you're gonna get nailed."

When Jake didn't say nothin', I went on to tell him what a nice man Tom Irwin is. Reckon that musta calmed his ruffled feathers

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some, 'cause he slowed down an' asked me where I knowed Tom from.

The question pained me some 'cause it brung back a hurtin' memory.

"From Jed," I told him.

Jed was an unwanted boy me an' my Elmer took in, raised, an' grew to love. A boy the war took from us. "Tom Irwin was Jed's sergeant in Vietnam," I said. "He was there when that sniper killed our boy. He stopped in to see me when he come home to tell me how things was over there an' why Jed quit writin'."

A warm hand reached out and took my own. I looked over an' seen my pain reflected on Jake's face.

"Time don't heal every wound," I said.

"I understand," he said.

We sat drawin' comfort from one another while Jake drove on to Wickenburg. Sometimes I think it's the comfortin' in life that makes it worth the struggle. Sometimes I even think it's the only reason for livin'.

When we reached the Wickenburg Municipal Airport, Jake parked in front of the Guerra Transport offices. I walked him to where the plane was waitin' an' give him a goodbye peck on the lips, then I watched him board the plane and take off. It pained me some to see him go, but I figured it was for the best.

Jake called me that afternoon at three o'clock. "Emily," he said, "can you come out here tomorrow?"

That liked to knock me offa my feet 'cause it seemed like a mighty empty-headed question in light a my feelings about dude ranches. Then it hit me that Jake wouldn't a called so soon to ask such a question iffen somethin' weren't mighty wrong.

"I s'pose I could get Guerra to fly me out," I said.

"No," he said. "Not Guerra. We need someone who knows how to handle himself in a fight. Get hold of Tom Irwin and ask him to fly you out to an old jeep trail just west of the ranch. I'll meet you there tomorrow morning at ten."

"Why tomorrow? Why not today?" I asked.

"Because I need that much time," he said.

"Jake, what's wrong?" I asked.

I heard a click on the line like somebody had just picked up the phone on my party line. I reckon we both must a heard it because

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it stopped our conversation for about a minute. It was Jake who finally broke the silence.

"Emily, I can't talk any more—" his voice was soft an' strained. "Maybe after you get that business straightened out, you'll be able to fly up here and join me. Please tell me you'll do that."

"I will," I said.

"Then I'll see you soon," he said. "Goodbye, Emily."

The other end a that line went dead an' my heart froze in my chest. Jake was in trouble. I knowed he was.

I dialed Irwin's number, got a recorded message, an' left my name and phone number after the sound a the beep. Then I dialed Carlos Guerra's number. He answered on the second ring.

"Carlos," I said, "this is Em Grady."

"Jake McEwan told me you might be calling," Carlos said. "I sent one of my other pilots out this afternoon so I could be here to fly you to the ranch."

"Then Jake phoned you, too?" I asked.

"No, he hasn't phoned. He told me this morning when I flew him out that you might change your mind and come along. That *is* why you called, isn't it?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I just got a phone call from Jake that leads me to think they might be some kind a trouble on that ranch. You ever hear of any trouble out there?"

The other end a the line fell silent for a while, then Carlos said, "The only complaint I ever heard from the people I fly in and out of there is that most of the help speaks nothing but Spanish."

"Spanish ain't gonna bother Jake," I said. "He speaks it like a native."

"Maybe he's just lonely," Carlos said.

No, that ain't it, I wanted to say. I know Jake well enough to know that ain't it. But I also knowed that iffen I said that to Carlos he'd fly on out to the ranch to check on Jake, an' Jake didn't want that. "I reckon you're right," I said. "Jake's probably just a mite lonely."

"Well, if you change your mind about joining him," he said, "just give me a call."

I promised I would an' hung up. Then I sat by the phone the rest of the day an' half the night waitin' for Irwin to return my call.

He called at ten-thirty.

I told him 'bout Jake's strange request. "You got any idea what's happenin' out there?" I asked.

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"I cain't be totally sure," he said, "but I think it may have something to do with a cargo plane that flies in and out of that ranch every Thursday afternoon. I been watching it now for better than six months, and I can tell you it flies in from Mexico and its identification numbers are unreadable because someone's smeared some thick black stuff over 'em."

They was only one reason I could think of for someone to fly a plane like that in from Mexico every Thursday afternoon.

"You think they're smugglin' drugs onto that ranch?" I asked.

"It could be," Tom answered.

He agreed to meet me at the Wickenburg Municipal Airport at nine o'clock the next morning.

A sense a pure despair settled over me. Jake had gone to that ranch alone because I was too much of a stick-in-the-mud to go with him. Iffen somethin' happened to him out there, I knowed I would never forgive myself.

I got to the airport a little after nine the next mornin' an' found Tom talkin' to Carlos in front a Guerra's hangar. When I come up to them, Tom shed a look a pure worry on me an' Carlos looked downright sympathetic.

"I'll be in my office," Carlos said to Tom. "You can reach me by radio there if you need any help." Then he walked into his office without so much as sayin' howdy to me.

I looked at Tom. "You tell him what's goin' on?"

"Yes," he said. "It's just a precaution, Em. Carlos has four good men, all Vietnam vets, who fly for him. He's promised to send them after us if we radio for help or if we don't get back before noon."

We boarded Tom's Cessna, took off, an' headed northeast across country that changed from chaparral to sage to a desolate white-sand desert. Tom followed the dry bed of the Hassayampa River until we come to a large spring-fed oasis where someone had built a square a buildings around a swimmin' pool shaped like a bull. To the west a them buildings was a barn an' a landin' strip. Just west a that landin' strip was the rutted jeep trail Jake had told me about.

"That jeep trail runs across thirty miles of desert to connect the ranch with Highway 17," Tom said. "It's the only road access onto the ranch. Funny, but I always wondered how a dude ranch without good road access could manage to stay in business, even if it does have a good airstrip."

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"Iffen they're dealin' drugs out there, isolation would be an asset," I said.

"Yes, it would," he agreed.

Tom followed the jeep trail out past the chaparral to the edge of the white-sand desert, where a tin-roofed rock shack stood beside a drought-stunted palo verde tree. I looked down an' seen a lone horseman beside the shack near the tree. When the horseman took off his Stetson an' waved, I knowed he was Jake.

Tom flew low over the area to pick out a landin' spot, then circled back around an' set the plane down on hard-packed sand. No sooner had he come to a stop but Jake was standin' on the ground beside the plane. He helped me outa the plane an' give me a big hug. I took in all the warm scents a him an' thanked the good Lord for his safety. Then he turned loose a me an' stepped back. "Emily," he said. "I'm so glad you came."

He turned around an' whistled softly, and a beautiful Mexican woman, dressed in an embroidered white Hupil dress, stepped out from behind the palo verde tree. Jake shouted somethin' to her in Spanish and she came runnin' over an' stood beside him. Her large black eyes took in Tom an' me, but she didn't smile.

"This is Nina," Jake said. "She's a slave on the El Toro Dude Ranch."

"Slave?" I repeated. "Ain't we got laws against slavery?"

"Not for poor people who come here illegally in search of jobs," he said. "Coyotes like Lopez prey on the poor."

I seen the girl flinch when he mentioned Lopez. Jake said somethin' to her in Spanish an' the tension melted from her face.

"Who's this here Lopez?" I asked.

"He's the owner of the ranch," Jake said. "He has a need for laborers who fear the law, so he flies illegal aliens up from Mexico to work for him. He promises them food, shelter, and wages that they can save up to go back home on. What they really get is food, shelter—and shot if they try to leave."

Tom Irwin's blue eyes took in Nina, from her neatly bunned hair to the leather sandals on her feet. The look on his face was a mixture of appreciation an' concern.

"What kind of slave is she?" he asked.

"So far, she only cooks and cleans," Jake said. "But her beauty has attracted the unwanted attention of Lopez. When she spurned him, he became angry and threatened to give her to a mean cowhand named Bronco, who delights in doing Lopez's dirty work."

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Terror widened Nina's eyes again when she heard Bronco's name. I could see she was shakin'.

"Emily, I want you to take her back with you," Jake said. "Keep her at your rock shop until we can figure out how to settle what's happening out here."

"What *is* happenin'?" I asked.

"Besides slavery, smuggling," he answered. "Every Thursday a cargo plane flies in with a load of cargo. Sometimes the cargo is in huge wooden crates that take six men to unload. Sometimes it's just a few cardboard boxes no bigger than shirt-boxes. Buyers from all over the world fly in on Friday to bid on the cargo. Yesterday a buyer from Colombia paid two million dollars in cash for one small cardboard box. The help has no idea what the man bought."

"Huge crates or small boxes," Tom pondered. "If they're smuggling drugs, the cargo wouldn't vary so much in size. But if they're smuggling weapons, it might. Guns and missiles can be crated. Plastic explosives could be carried in a small cardboard box. Black-market weapons could be bought in Central America and flown up here by way of Mexico."

"You got any ideas on how to handle this?" I asked Jake.

Jake pulled a piece a paper outa his pocket an' handed it to me. It had a telephone number written on it. "I want you to call Maria Lucia Sanchez at this number," he said. "She's the only person I know who can find out exactly what they're smuggling and then help us free these people out here."

"Just who is this here Maria Lucia Sanchez?" I asked.

Jake's face took on a dreamy look an' I knowed without askin' that this woman had been special to him. His eyes settled on mine. "She's the woman who helped us tax those taxies in Las Vegas," he said. "She was Bugsy Segal's secretary the year I ran messages for him."

"Why not just call in the police?" Tom asked.

Jake's face took on a hard look. "Because I think Nina and the rest of her people deserve more than a free ride back to Mexico courtesy of our border patrol. I think they deserve compensation for their labor and Maria Lucia should be able to help us get them that compensation. These are her people—she'll want to help them."

I looked into them determined, almost angry eyes a his an' fear twanged at my heartstrings. It seemed to me that just gettin' Nina offa that ranch was a mighty dangerous thing for him to do. Someone there musta overheard him speakin' Spanish to her, maybe someone

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who'd tell Lopez about the old gringo who was bein' kind to Nina. An' maybe Lopez would put two an' two together an' figure Jake had somethin' to do with the girl's disappearance.

"Be careful, Jake," I said. "I—" The words was lost in my feelings. I looked into them soft blue eyes an' I reckon my own eyes musta told him everythin' I felt 'cause he gave me a gentle kiss an' then walked me back to the plane.

"I'll be just fine, old girl," he said. "Don't you worry about that. Nina's brother will look out for me. He'll find me a place to hide if things get too rough."

The look of confidence on his face chilled me to the bone. I seen that same look a confidence on my Elmer's face the day he went out into the desert to teach Beatty a lesson an' got himself killed instead. I didn't want to lose Jake McEwan, too.

When Tom flew Nina an' me outa there, I looked down an' seen a lone rider on a horse, an' I wished with all my heart I was down there ridin' with him.

When we got back to the airport, I used Carlos' phone to call Maria Lucia Sanchez. She got right down to the basics a what we needed and agreed to meet Tom an' Carlos an' me at nine-thirty the next mornin' at Guerra's hangar. It would take her that long, she said, to track down just what kinda smugglin' was goin' on at the ranch and where that two million dollars come from. She told me she had an idea about how to get her people the wages they'd earned and then help them get back to Mexico. All she needed was some trusted pilots and did I know of any.

Well, I didn't know of any, but Carlos did, so I put him on the phone. Guerra's air force, he called his group a rednecks because any one a them men would drop what he was doin' on a moment's notice to fly for him. Yep, if Maria Lucia wanted an air force, Carlos Guerra would furnish it for her. An' Carlos is a very careful man. It ain't like him to agree to anything even remotely dangerous, but he agreed to everythin' Maria Lucia wanted. I couldn't wait to meet so persuasive a lady.

The next morning, precisely at nine-thirty, a twin-engine plane set down on the runway a the Wickenburg Municipal Airport, rolled to a stop in front a the Guerra hangar, the steps was lowered, an' the door opened.

Maria Lucia Sanchez was everythin' I expected her to be an' a little bit more. Silver-haired, skin that looked like soft, light choc-

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olate, and the figure of a teenager she dressed in the latest Paris fashions. 'Course, she was a mite older than what Tom had expected, but he kept his disappointment to himself. I reckoned from the look on Carlos' face that she was everythin' he'd expected.

"La Madre Rica," he whispered. "Here. I can't believe it."

Maria Lucia walked over to us and shook hands with the men. She gave me a hug that allowed the rich, warm scent a her perfume to fill my nose, then she stepped back an' give my bluejeans an' Pendleton shirt a quick onceover.

"I never would have thought a woman like you would capture Jake McEwan's heart," she said.

"I ain't—"

"Oh, yes, you have," she interrupted. "You and your safety were the most important topic we discussed when he asked for my help in Las Vegas. I assure you, you have accomplished what other women have only dreamed of. You have smitten Jake."

Before I could think of anythin' to say, two men come down the steps to the plane—two men that I last seen in Las Vegas all dressed up in plumber's clothes. Two men who packed 357 Magnums in their toolboxes. One was tall and stocky, the other was lean an' short. Both a them was duded out in fancy cowboy clothes, the kind real cowboys could never afford and wouldn't be caught dead in, anyway.

"You remember my men," she said to me. "But you have never been formally introduced to them."

The tall one she introduced as Calvin. The short Latino was Eduardo. I said my howdies an' shook their hands.

"I have found out a great deal about our Mister Lopez," Maria said, "and I can assure you he is a small-time hoodlum involved in a big-time business." Then she told us what she'd planned an' we all added a touch or two of our own. It was agreed that Tom would stay in the air above the ranch so he could radio our progress back to Guerra. If anythin' went wrong, Guerra's air force would come to our rescue. If everythin' went as planned, Carlos an' his pilots could begin flyin' Nina and her people home within an hour or two. No matter what happened, Maria and her men were to have one undisturbed hour with Lopez.

I went an' got my suitcase an' Old Betsy, my Winchester shotgun, outa my jeep an' toted them into the plane. Eduardo looked at Old Betsy an' raised his eyebrows.

"This here's for clippin' the hair offa no-good coyotes," I said. "I never did carton to coyotes."

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"Clippin' coyotes," Maria said. "How very appropriate."

I set Old Betsy an' my suitcase on the floor a the plane beside a set a fancy leather cases that was too small for carryin' clothes an' too long an' narrow for cosmetics. Then I sat down beside Maria Lucia.

"What's in them fancy leather cases back there?" I asked her.

"Uzi machine guns," she said. "They are a part of my plan I didn't feel it was necessary to tell Tom or Carlos about."

The plane took off an' banked right. I sat lookin' out my window, wonderin' who she was plannin' on shootin' when we landed.

When the pilot set the plane down on the airstrip, we rolled past a white Cadillac parked near its edge. Maria Lucia seen it an' smiled. "Lopez has sent his car to meet us," she said.

Our plane taxied to a stop an' Eduardo opened the door an' cranked the stairs down. I looked out the door an' seen a short Latino step out a the Cadillac, duded up in fancy leather boots, white slacks, an' a shiny silver guayabera shirt. His black hair was slicked back away from his forehead an' there wasn't a whisker to be seen on his smooth brown face. He all but strutted over to the stairs to wait for us.

"Lopez," Maria said to me. "El Coyote Loco, The Crazy Coyote, my people call him. I call him El Bandito Pequeño, The Little Bandit. Soon he will learn just who I am." She stood, walked to the door, an' glided down the stairs. Eduardo an' Calvin picked up the leather cases an' trailed along after her. I watched Lopez take her right hand an' press it to his lips, then I saw her introduce Eduardo and Calvin. He shook their hands, a smooth hombre, all smiles an' manicured manners an' little black snake-eyes that size you up—he's the kinda gent who makes you want to count your fingers after you shake his hand.

I picked up my suitcase an' Old Betsy an' walked down the stairs. Lopez looked from Old Betsy to me an' back again.

"Emily," Maria said. "This is our host, Jose Marino Lopez. Jose, this is Emily Grady."

"Why the gun?" he asked.

"She's an antique," I said. "Just like me. An' antiques is gotta be used once in a while to keep them fit, so I brung her along to do a little plinkin' in the desert."

Lopez give me a look that equated me with an eccentric old lady an' told me to enjoy my shootin'. Then he drove us to the ranch,

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where a bellboy took me to my room while Maria an' her men went to Lopez's office to have a chat.

No sooner had the bellboy left my room but Jake McEwan come in.

"Emily," he said, "I have to get to Maria. Bronco, the cowhand I told you about, has taken Nina's brother, Ricardo."

"You can't get to Maria," I said. "She an' her men are with Lopez an' she left strict orders not to be disturbed."

"But Bronco will kill the boy. I know he will, because he thinks Ricardo knows where Nina is."

"Do you know where he took Ricardo?" I asked.

"Yes. To the rock cabin west of the airstrip."

I picked up Old Betsy, checked to see that both a her barrels was loaded, an' put a handful a shells in my shirt pocket. Then I looked at Jake. "I reckon we best get a move on," I said.

"Emily," he said. "I'm afraid the only way to get there is by horse."

"Then I reckon I ain't too old to stretch my legs over one," I told him. "Let's go."

Old Betsy was tucked into a gun holder that was strapped over the saddle horn an' I was levered into the saddle by a strong Mexican, who grunted when I put my weight in his hand. 'Course Jake didn't need no help gettin' on his horse. When it came to horses, he was ever' bit as agile as a young John Wayne. I reckon we made quite a pair on them horses, with me groanin' over every little bump an' him lookin' like he was born to ride. Step aside, Pilgrim, I thought as we rode along, 'cause the gigolo a the senior citizens' set is ridin' out to save the world.

I heard a plane overhead, looked up, seen it dip a wing in greetin', an' knowed Irwin was up there keepin' track a things.

The plane was in our sight until we reached the cabin, then it dipped down again an' flew outa sight. We tied the reins of our horses to a creosote bush about fifty feet away from the cabin an' snuck up to the door.

Ricardo was in there, all right, bound an' tied to a chair in the middle a the room. But we didn't see hide nor hair a the no-good hombre that'd tied him there. Jake an' me went inside the cabin. "Where's Bronco?" Jake asked Ricardo, takin' out a knife to cut the ropes.

"Gone," the boy said. "Into the desert to search for Nina. He said he would come back at dusk and shoot me if he did not find her."

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Jake sliced the ropes an' Ricardo reached down to rub the circulation past the rope burns on his ankles.

"Think you can stand?" Jake asked.

"With help," Ricardo said. "My feet, they sleep."

We helped him to his feet an' began walkin' him around the cabin. He was just beginnin' to carry his own weight when a voice reached out an' yanked all three a us to a stop.

"Well, well, well," it said, "if it ain't the grandparents."

The three a us turned around to see a big man with sweaty armpits an' bar-brawler's scars on his nose an' cheeks standin' in the doorway with a rifle aimed in our direction. The man looked from Ricardo to Jake to me an' a smile parted his lips just enough to show off his chipped front teeth. Then he aimed the rifle at Ricardo.

"You didn't tell me we was expecting company, boy," he said. "An' I don't like having unexpected company. Now, you *know* I don't like that, don't you, boy? *Don't* you?"

"Yes, Senor Bronco," Ricardo said, lowering his eyes to the floor.

Bronco shifted the rifle onto Jake. "Well, if it ain't the old gringo who befriended little brother's pretty sister. Just before she disappeared."

Then he shifted the rifle onto me. "I don't think I've met Grandma here," he said. "Tell me, Gramps, is she a friend of yours, too?"

I was carrying Old Betsy in my left hand. If I could only raise her nose a notch, I reasoned, I could let loose one a her barrels.

"Drop the gun, Grandma," Bronco said.

He was as mean a lookin' sidewinder as I ever laid eyes on, with greasy black hair that hung down to his shoulders. He was eyein' me the way a rattler eyes a mouse. "I ain't gonna ask you twice," he said.

I seen his finger toyin' with the trigger an' I let Old Betsy slip outa my hand an' fall to the floor.

Bronco moved the barrel of his rifle offa me back onto Ricardo. "Where's Nina?" he asked.

"She's outa the reach a scum like you," I said.

He spit on the floor. "Just who are you calling scum, Grandma?"

"You," I told him.

He moved the rifle back onto me and his trigger finger was beginnin' to press onto the trigger again. "If I was you, I'd apologize for saying that."

"The truth don't require no apologies," I told him.

"You're as good as dead, Grandma," he said.

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Jake yanked Ricardo aside an' stepped in front a me. When I tried to move outa his way, he grabbed hold a my wrist an' shoved me back behind him.

"Get out of the way!" Bronco shouted at him.

Jake stood his ground.

"I said, 'Get out of the way!' "

"Jake, please," I said. "I ain't afraid. Please!"

"Emily, shut up!" he said.

I did.

"You know I'm gonna shoot," Bronco said.

Jake didn't answer.

"You know that the bullet will pass right through you and into her."

Silence. The kinda silence that stills every livin' thing. Then—

"Tell me, Gramps, is she really worth dying for?"

I heard the click of a hammer bein' pulled back.

I tried to step out from behind Jake, but he wouldn't let me, an' I heard a loud explosion, followed by the sound a dust splatterin' against the floor. I expected Jake to collapse onto the floor, but he stood his ground.

I kept waitin' for him to fall, an' he just stood there. Then I heard scufflin' sounds an' I looked out from behind Jake an' seen Tom Irwin wrestlin' on the floor with Bronco for the rifle. I picked up Old Betsy an' fired one a her barrels into the floor just to the left a them, an' the sound a her froze them in place for a few seconds. Then Irwin scooted outa the way.

I sighted down Old Betsy onto that mangy cowpoke an' he started to raise the barrel a his rifle at me. "Lift that barrel one more inch," I said, "an' I'll blow your head off. I got no qualms when it comes to killin' no-good sidewinders like you."

Tom Irwin scrambled to his feet an' just stepped on the barrel a that gun an' forced it down onto the floor. "If I was you," he said, "I wouldn't cross this lady."

Bronco groaned an' turned loose a the gun. Tom give it a kick that sent it sailin' across the room, then he yanked Bronco up by his shirt, dragged him over to the chair, an' shoved him down onto it. He tied his hands to the back a the chair and his feet to the legs, then tested the rope an' stepped back. "That ought to hold him," he said.

"How did you know?" I asked him.

"I saw him trailing you from the air," he said. "When I saw him

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carry that rifle here to the cabin, I set my plane down and came running."

"We'd be dead if it weren't for you," Jake told him.

No, I thought as I looked at him. You'd be dead. I'd probably just be wounded. You stepped in front of me. You—

"You risked your life for me," I said to him.

He looked down at me an' I seen somethin' more than warmth in them blue eyes a his. "Nobody shoots Jake McEwan's lady," he said. "Nobody."

Jake McEwan's lady. Jake McEwan's lady. He had used them words before, but this time they was a deeper meanin' to them. This time he'd risked his life to save mine.

"We best get back," Tom said. "I just called in the air force. The boy can come with me. You and Jake will have to ride back."

They was five planes countin' Maria's twin-engine Cessna parked on the airstrip when we got back, but the pilots weren't in them. We found them inside Lopez's office where Lopez was standin' in front of a empty safe. Eduardo an' Calvin was standin' on either side a him with their Uzis aimed at his temple. Maria was sittin' on the desk in front a Lopez, thumbin' through the huge piles a money stacked on it.

"I have friends!" Lopez shouted at her. "Powerful friends! You had better think about that, lady."

"Friends?" Maria said. "What friends, Lopez?"

When he opened his mouth to speak, she slapped it closed. "That is from Lima, your friend in Colombia who sent you that two million dollars," she said. "He said to give it to you after I told him that his courier was arrested in Prescott because a man by the name of Lopez tipped the police about the gold Mayan death mask he was carrying. I believe he bought that mask from you yesterday, did he not?" The color drained from Lopez's face. "Don't worry," she said to him, "the courier knows better than to tell the police where the mask came from. No one will ever learn of your antiquity-smuggling business. And Lima has already told me he will take no action against you if you refund his money."

She began transferring the money on the desk into a cardboard box.

"What are you doing with my money?" Lopez shouted. "What are you doing with my—"

"This is not your money," Maria said, looking at him with eyes

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that blazed with anger. "This money belongs to the fourteen people you imported from Mexico to work for you, and to the pilots who will fly them back home again. I will see that they get it."

"But where will I get Lima's two million dollars?" Lopez asked. "He will kill me if I don't return that money!"

Maria Lucia shed a look a disgust on him. "Sell the ranch," she said. "It should be worth that much."

Lopez dropped to his knees and pressed his head in his hands. Then he raised his eyes an' looked at her. "Who are you?"

"My people call me La Madre Rica," she said.

The name stunned him into silence.

"The Rich Mother," Jake translated for me. "She is something of a Robin Hood to her people."

It took almost two days for Guerra's air force to fly the illegal aliens back to their homes in Mexico. Nina and her brother were the last to go. When Jake an' me brought them to the Wickenburg Municipal Airport, Maria was there to see them off.

Guerra flew them home and we watched until his plane was a speck on the horizon. Then Maria walked us over to my jeep to say goodbye.

"There's somethin' I don't understand," I said to her. "Why did you tip the police about that mask?"

"Because it is part of my heritage," she said. "And a heritage should never be allowed to be sold. The gold death mask was part of the plunder stolen on Christmas Day in 1985 from the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City. I informed the police because I know they will return it to the museum where it belongs. For too long, ancient Maya and Aztec antiquities have been sold on the black market. I have done a small part to help end this theft of heritage."

She handed Jake an envelope with cash an' a couple a airline tickets in it. I started to protest, but she shushed me. "Emily," she said, "I have known Jake for fifty years, and for fifty years he has wanted to see Rome. I know him well enough to know that he would want to take the lady of his dreams with him. This is the least I can do for him." Then she turned an' walked away.

I got into the jeep an' started her up in a daze when Jake put a restrainin' hand on my arm. I looked into them blue eyes a his an' seen somethin' more than carin' there.

"Emily, I would like nothing better than to have the pleasure of

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your company in Rome," he said, "and anywhere else in the world you would like to go. If you will let me, I'll even make an honest woman of you before we leave."

I looked at that handsome face an' I felt lucky, because I knew I had loved, lost, an' then won again in the game a life. But I also knowed deep down inside that it was too soon, much too soon. Most a me still belonged to my Elmer, God rest his soul.

"Well, Emily," Jake said. "What do you say?"

Yes. No. Maybe. The words flew through my mind. Then the answer come to me.

"Jake, I would love to go to Rome with you," I said. "But I ain't figured out whether or not I want to be an honest woman."

A smile settled on his lips, then he chuckled to himself. Finally, he leaned over an' kissed my cheek, an' when I looked into them eyes a his I seen the devil dancin' up a jig. "My dear, sweet Emily," he grinned, "never let it be said that Jake McEwan doesn't appreciate dishonest women, too. Especially when he finds one as honest as you."

I stared at him. "What on earth are you grinnin' at?" I muttered.

"At the possibilities, my sweet," he said. "At the possibilities. I have never been a quitter. And Rome is such a romantic hunting ground. Don't you think so, Emily?"

Danged iffen them words didn't set my mind to ponderin' on the new game life had sent my way.

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

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Feelion streaked onto the patio, jumped the shallow step to the screen door, and huddled against it, peering toward the ebony yard. "You silly," Ella chided the cat. "Why do you like to pretend monsters . . .?"

WHAT'S OUT THERE?

by CAROL CAIL

He called her on his first night out. At least that hadn't changed. Ella was opening a can of liver for Feelion when the phone shrilled. She sucked at the thin red thread across a knuckle and, after the fourth ring, she lifted the receiver.

"How's it going, kid?"

"Hello, Ray."

"I made record time to Chicago. That new wind deflector picked me up some extra miles per gallon."

"Good."

"So here I am at Sunny's Truck Stop, fed and showered and ready to climb into a big, lonely bed."

"Is it hot there?"

"Does a bear et cetera?"

She leaned against the refrigerator. The cold metal chilled her skin. Feelion's pale face and neon eyes materialized at the screen door.

"Speaking of hot," Ray said, "do you realize we'll be wedded five years the thirty-first?"

"I won't forget."

"What the hell kind of answer is that? I didn't bring it up so's you'd run out and buy me a present."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry, Ray. I miss you, too."

"Okay. Well, I'll be home Friday. Take care of yourself."

"You, too," she said as she penciled and underlined "present" on the shopping list magnetized to the refrigerator door.

"And, hey, Ella. Catch up on your ironing this week. This permanent-press garbage you keep foisting on me has lost its permanent."

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"Right. I will." She found release in stamping at the cat. "He's climbing the screen. I have to hang up."

"What? Oh, yeah. 'Night."

Waving to keep the bugs at bay, she slid the door along its track just wide enough for Feelion to slither inside. A moth blundered through and homed in on the ceiling fixture.

The tiger tom leaned against her legs as Ella walked to the sink to get the liver. He twisted his neck to watch her hands and she was reminded of an athletic, redheaded, crewcut boy with sandy lashes over light eyes. Ray still looked the same, except his hair was darker and brushed his collar now.

She struggled to the door, Feelion tangled in her feet. This time she snapped off the light to discourage insects as she and the cat moved outside. She put the dish down at what she judged to be the edge of the concrete patio, fumbled for a redwood chair, and eased into it, enjoying the cooler air, the telegraphing of the crickets, and the total blackness.

She didn't mind the taciturn dark. When they were first married, she had wanted a baby to help her through the days and nights Ray was on the road. Ray said they couldn't afford it. One year and three months ago, her mother had died, leaving her ten thousand dollars. The money had gone toward buying this country subdivision house just before the developer went bankrupt, leaving them with one acre, two gravel streets, and a neighbor family a quarter mile away. Ray didn't want a baby.

Anita Chambers, mother/wife of the quarter-mile-distant family, sometimes came for coffee when she knew Ray was gone. "Don't you get nervous by yourself out here in Never-Never Land?"

"No. I'm used to being alone. I read and watch TV and do my crafts."

"Oh, well then, no problem!" Anita had mocked. "I only know that when Fred's on duty at the firehouse I'm taking sleeping pills at night and doting on the kids all day till he's back home." She meant well. She'd nagged Ella into joining a Thursday-morning bowling league, but the Thursdays Ray was home he expected his wife to be there, too, so Ella had found a substitute to finish the season.

Ella's eyes were phased into night vision now. She could see Feelion's dish inching across the patio under his fierce tongue. He gave it one last lick, sending it careening into the grass, and he followed it into the gloom . . .

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The sky wasn't black, after all, but mauve in the direction of the city. That same direction, along the back-fence line, a periodic sweep of white light invited any observer to follow the hypnotic beacon to one more grand opening. To the left of that, on the horizon, two yellow stars signified that the Chambers children were using their bath and bedrooms.

Feelion streaked onto the patio, jumped the shallow step to the screen door, and huddled against it, peering toward the ebony yard.

"You silly. Why do you like to pretend monsters?" Ella chided, smiling.

Feelion pressed deeper into the door, fur on end.

"All right, then, what is it? A dog? A skunk?"

The cat crouched, growling. He leaped toward the border of the patio, shied, and ducked under her chair.

Her smile quivered and died. "What's out there?"

She stood and Feelion ran to the screen, watching the yard over his shoulder. She listened. There was only the cricket noise and, far off, a cow calling.

She opened the door a slit to reach a forefinger inside to switch on the gable floodlight. A third of the yard leaped into view. It was empty and ordinary. The other two-thirds could have hidden a hundred dogs or skunks.

From the dark perimeter, something softly coughed.

Ella shoved the door and the cat streaked into the house. As she slammed the screen behind them, Ella felt it jump the track. She shut and locked the glass door, too, in spite of the heat, then toured the house, locking windows and doors.

After she felt safe, she felt foolish. She coaxed Feelion from under the bed and massaged his bullet head during an hour of Monday prime-time TV. Then, with determined coldness, she dropped him on the breezeway porch and shut the door against his stare. He'd always been an outside cat.

She never saw him again. He wasn't on the porch in the morning, and he didn't show up for supper. She was amused at first that he knew how to punish her, but when night came she shouted out the back door and the yawning, empty yard echoed her aloneness. She watched TV without sound—she needed to listen for Feelion, or for whatever else might call her.

Think of something pleasant, she counseled herself, taking up her

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needlepoint. Like Ray that first year, when he was thirty and she was twenty and being married was what she'd always wanted.

A door slammed and the needle stabbed her left palm. The curtains billowed inward with the turbulence before a storm. Ella gathered herself to make rounds, shutting it out.

She stopped in the unlit kitchen by the patio screen door, letting the fresh air wash her, watching the horizon flicker with lightning. The back line shrubs and trees thrashed and writhed—all but one.

Ella stared at the spot, waiting for another flash to illuminate the one tall shape that didn't sway in the wind. There. Too massive and unsymmetrical to be a post. It was unchanged for three successive flashes. When the fourth came, it was gone.

Ella pulled the shield of glass in front of herself and locked it. She plunged from room to room, securing windows. Dining room, living room. Beggarman, thief. Bigfoot. Den. In the bedroom, Ray's scent revived her common sense. An animal, a deer or runaway horse, her mind scolded in Ray's voice.

The rain didn't come. The wind moved on to torment somewhere else, leaving unnatural quiet. Ella didn't check to see if anything moved.

She went to bed too early, and the close room and glowing hall light irritated her sleep. Something nameless occupied her dreams.

She woke knowing the thud was real. She lay sweating, identifying the sound—the clothes-basket made it whenever she went outside to the lines, when the door slapped home too fast. Something had hit the laundry-room door.

The bedroom brightened, darkened, and a few beats later thunder reverberated in the distance, jarring the house. She relaxed then. She could go to the laundry and part the curtains and look at an empty night. Still, the vision of herself peering out to discover some demon face peering in weighted her to the bed.

This time it rained. The thrumming on the roof soothed her to sleep, where Ray did tender things to her that she couldn't summon back the next morning.

Wednesday dragged its hours. Ella remembered the ironing and, with an effort, forgot it. She dialed Anita's number and let it ring ten times. She missed Ray the way she had the first year, and somehow that was comforting.

At noon, Ella attacked the house with sweeper, disinfectant, and

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polish. She drove herself till eight o'clock, her goal exhaustion and an easy sleep.

At nine o'clock, she sat at the kitchen table, rearranging the supper on her plate. A dying sun bloodied the sky. Shadows oozed and ran together on the lawn. One cricket began to saw an incantation.

When the yard disappeared, Ella switched on the light to clear away the dishes, and, feeling watched, smacked a glass on the edge of the sink.

Though she picked up the razored pieces with deliberate slowness, her legs ached to run and her clumsy fingers began to burn and sting. "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," she remembered, rinsing red into the drain.

She drew the drapes before lighting the bedroom lamps. She slept, but she didn't rest.

She woke late with a headache. She tried phoning Anita again, and Fred's voice boomed along the line.

"I forgot this was bowling morning," Ella apologized. "Never mind, it wasn't important."

Popping aspirin and cookies, she stared at the TV till night slipped back. When she shut down the set, the quick silence rang in her ears. Sighing, she dragged the ironing board into the middle of the kitchen and thumped the iron on it to heat.

While she waited, she put the day's meager dishes into the washer with yesterday's unclean load, levered the door shut, and dialed Start. And the room went black.

Ella froze in the void. Her brain scurried. A broken circuit—too many drains on one circuit!

She felt her way to the dining room and found the wall switch. The colonial chandelier drilled into her eyes. Ella leaned her face into her elbow as she braced against the door jamb, letting thoughts project against her lids.

She could see herself opening and closing doors. First the door between house and breezeway. Shut it, but don't lock it, for escape's sake. Ten steps across the open no-man's-land of concrete porch. Then the door between breezeway and garage. Several seconds till stiff fingers coax the key to fit and turn. The light switch, left-shoulder high. The circuit breakers, regimented in their box, face high on the opposite wall. The car standing innocent between. Lock the door she'd entered, and lock something out—or in?

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And what would be slipping through the house door while her back was turned?

The telephone scattered her thoughts and fast-forwarded her heart. She released a painful breath and groped across the kitchen.

"Ella?" Anita's no-nonsense voice began. "Fred just remembered that you called this morning."

"It wasn't important. I just felt like gossiping a while."

"Are you all right? You sound funny."

"It's nothing. I'm edgy tonight—so silly. The kitchen circuit just blew and I'm not good at electrical things."

"Fred will come over and fix it."

"Oh, no, please don't bother him. It can wait till morning."

"Is your refrigerator off, too?"

"Um, I'm not—I don't know."

"He'll be over in a jiffy," Anita bossed, hanging up on further argument.

Ella lit the gable lights and waited behind the glass door. She would meet him on the patio and take him directly to the garage. He needn't wonder at the closed, stuffy house.

A tiny light bobbed and winked across the field behind the yard and grew into a flashlight beam. When it reached the line of boundary trees, Ella slid the glass aside. She stopped watching the light to wrestle with the derailed screen, which she'd forgotten to repair. She couldn't find the right groove—it opened and jammed there—then she looked up and the light was gone. She poised on the threshold, listening.

The inevitable cricket cacophony. A June beetle battering a screen. A truck grinding gears miles distant. Something else. A shuffling noise. Like a rake on leaves.

Ella stepped backward into the mouth of the house.

The shuffling became a dull, rhythmic pounding, louder and louder, shushing the crickets. Ella pawed the glass door and it slowly heaved toward the latch.

The gable lights picked out a shape, a tall figure with legs that moved in time with the pulsating noise. Ella was stricken with the weakness of relief, and the door rolled dead midway along the track. Through the gap she welcomed, "Fred?"

There was no answer, and the shape pounded toward her. Something wicked.

She fell back into the kitchen and threw the door in front of her.

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On the glass, the chandelier's reflection shivered like sun on water, and superimposed, breaching the dark, a body hurtled toward her.

She slapped at the lock, and fear ached in her throat.

With a hoarse cry, the creature leaped onto the patio, thundered across it, and smashed against the glass door. The plate shuddered and began to slide, sparkling and clattering to the floor.

Backed against the refrigerator, her hands mauling each other, Ella stared at the contour of a man lying panting in the wreckage.

"Ella!"

The room dipped and jigged around her as his voice bled into her ears. "I knew if I watched long enough he'd come. I want to kill you, too, but it's too much trouble right now." He shifted his body and the red of his hair glittered with glass and blood.

"Kill me, too? *Too?*" Her legs felt like they were melting. "Why aren't you in Chicago?" she grieved.

"I knew you had a lover. You sure as hell didn't love me any more."

ON OUR COVER

Michael Crawford, now in New York playing the Phantom of the Opera in Andrew Lloyd Webber's version of Gaston Leroux's 1911 thriller about the disfigured genius of the Paris Opera House, won London's Olivier Award for Best Actor in a Musical for the role. He is probably best known in America for his roles in the films *Hello, Dolly!, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,* and *The Knack. The Phantom* marks his first appearance on the New York stage since his 1967 debut in Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy.*

Mr. Crawford was recently awarded the Order of the British Empire and named Showbusiness Personality of the Year by the Variety Club of Great Britain. His first solo album, *The Michael Crawford Album,* is soon to be released in the U.S.

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"I'm a mystery buff," Decamp said. "Mystery's my hobby. My business is precious stones. If I hadn't broken my damn leg I'd be sitting with a guy right this minute making the deal of a lifetime . . ."

A CAST WITH CHARACTER

by CHARLES NICOLO

I was lucky. Mother had reminded me to book my ticket in advance. She knew that at the height of the ski season in the Swiss Alps, first class—our class—is always fully booked. The compartment they assigned me was one of the old-fashioned kind still found on some European trains, the seats and arm rests covered with elegant blue velvet. Mother would have loved it. Her favorite color is blue.

I'd come to the station early to make sure I got a window seat, but had to give it up just before departure time to an American wearing a large plaster cast on his leg. He had to sit with his leg straight out, supported by a padded board the attendant put under it, with his foot on the seat opposite. With him next to the window, the rest of us in the compartment didn't have to step over his leg every time we came or went.

Henry Decamp, a man of middle age, paunchy and balding, wasn't comfortable in his cast. He turned and twisted and kept asking his pretty young English wife, who wore a short leather skirt, high fur boots, and a spiky blonde hairstyle, to remove his sock and tell him whether his toes had turned blue.

"The doctor told me if my toes turn blue I should come back and he'll cut off the cast." These were the first words he spoke to me. Later we introduced ourselves.

I sat opposite Mrs. Decamp—Betty, as her husband insisted we call her. Between Betty and the door sat a young Swiss man of athletic build, Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. Opposite him and next to me was a small, elderly gentleman, either French or Swiss, who carried the stem of his unlit pipe upside down in his teeth. I didn't catch his name since he was holding his pipe in that manner when he told it to us.

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The train was hardly out of the station before I'd forgotten about the plastered foot next to me. Decamp had kindly insisted on riding backward with his wife to give me a forward—if once removed—view out the window. In the station that morning, I'd bought a copy of the local newspaper. Being fluent in several European languages, I never have to wait to find a newspaper of my own country, in which the news would already be old.

When I unfolded the journal, which was hardly larger than an American newsletter but printed on inferior stock and several pages thicker, the headlines cried out:

CAT BURGLAR STRIKES AGAIN
ONE MILLION $ IN GEMS STOLEN AT SWISS SKI RESORT

Noticing that Henry Decamp had no reading material and thinking that the story of the burglary might take his mind off his leg, I translated the headlines into English for him. My words had quite an effect.

"Read it again," he demanded.

"Oh, Henry," said his wife, "the gentleman's already read it once. You can't bother him to do it again. We'll get you a *Trib* or something in Paris."

"No bother," I told them. "I'll be happy to read it again." And I did.

When I was finished, Decamp held out his hand. "Can I see that?" I handed him the paper and for a moment he stared at the page as if by sheer force of will he could decipher the words. Then he leafed quickly through all the pages. "No photographs," he grunted and handed the paper back.

His reaction interested me. "Do you know anything about the robbery?" I couldn't resist asking.

He seemed surprised by my question. "Who, me?" he asked. Then he frowned. "The burglary took place in the hotel where my wife and I were staying. In fact, it happened just about the time I was falling down its front steps and breaking my leg."

"Then you didn't break it in a skiing accident."

"Hell, no. I tripped on the stairs. That's how we met Karl here. Karl happened to be walking by and helped them get me to a doctor. He even held my leg while the doctor wrapped the plaster bandage around it."

"Well," I said, "if you were at the hotel, even on the front steps of it, when the robbery was taking place, in a way you're—involved."

"I am? How?"

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"Without even realizing it, you might have seen something that would give the police a clue."

"Henry see something?" laughed his wife. Just then I noticed a movement on the seat next to her—she and the young man beside her were holding hands!

"I see more than you give me credit for," replied Decamp meaningfully.

"Like hell he does," Betty murmured, but she took back her hand and laid it virtuously in her lap. Then her voice rose like that of a petulant child. "All Henry ever thinks about is murder and shooting and jewel robberies. It's not surprising—"

"What my wife means," Decamp interrupted, "is that I'm a mystery buff. Mystery's my hobby. My business is precious stones. If I hadn't broken my damn leg—" he looked at his watch "—I'd be sitting with a guy right this minute making the deal of a lifetime."

"If you're in the jewelry business, maybe you know the person who was robbed."

"The article didn't give his name," said Decamp.

"That's surprising," I said. "Reporters usually love digging up all the juicy details."

"Some people like publicity, some don't. For a guy in the trade, like me, it would have meant some free advertising. For some other guy it might tip off the I.R.S. There's plenty of reasons for people to want their names kept out of the paper."

"Henry gave me these," said Betty, leaning across so that I could get a look at the diamonds on her ears and the solitaire on her finger. They were pretty, but skimpy. If ever I have a wife, Mother'll help me choose the right jewelry for her, and the right clothes. I wondered rather cynically how long Decamp intended staying married to Betty.

"They're very attractive," I assured her.

"You don't think they're a bit small?"

Caught off guard by her candor, I was glad to come up with the right words. "Not at all," I told her easily. "No one today goes about in flashy jewelry. It'd be tempting fate."

"Henry's had them insured. He's very professional." Turning her head to the left, she gave a wide smile to her Swiss neighbor.

"Are *you* a mystery buff, by any chance?" Decamp asked me, rattling off a list of his favorite authors.

"Not really. Not in your class. But now I see why the jewel robbery interests you so much. Have you any ideas on it?"

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"Damn right I do," said he. "I'm asking myself how the thief would get away with the loot. I mean, he sure doesn't live in the resort, and they don't allow cars up there, so he'd have to take this train out like everyone else. Right?"

"Right."

"So he oughta be on this train."

"Yes. Of course he could be. A very clever deduction."

"Thank you." After saying this, Decamp seemed to enter a personal world of deep concentration, as if the rest of us didn't exist.

After a few minutes of total lack of conversation in the compartment, Betty got to her feet. "I'm going to the club car to see if there's a buffet. You want anything, Henry?"

But her husband only shook his head silently.

As Betty went through the door, the Swiss man got up and followed her. Throwing a bemused glance at me, the old gentleman on my left got to his feet. Then, with his book clutched under his arm and the pipe clenched between his teeth, he, too, left the compartment.

Alone with Henry Decamp, I had the definite feeling that an interesting conversation was about to begin between me and this rather typical but by no means stupid American. Any man able to appreciate stories of mystery and crime and make his living buying and selling precious stones is not to be underestimated. I continued reading my newspaper, feeling sure that sooner or later he'd speak to me.

"Mister," he said after a few minutes, "I didn't get your name."

I told him my name and waited to hear what he had to say.

"I'm a betting man," he confided. "What about you?"

His question took me by surprise. "I don't mind a wager now and then," I told him. "What do you have in mind?"

"Give me a minute to get it phrased right," he said, and fell silent again, pondering.

"Are you still wondering about this jewel theft?" I asked after a few minutes.

"I am, and the more I think about it the surer I am that the thief and the jewels are on this train. The question is, where would the safest place be for him to hide them?"

"I can't imagine," I said. "I suppose he'd hide them in his luggage."

"Then he'd risk inspection by Customs officers when we enter France."

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I shrugged. "People sometimes have false bottoms in their suitcases."

"He wouldn't be the type. No, he'd find a more interesting place. A tobacco pouch might be okay if the jewelry wasn't too bulky. One diamond can be worth a million dollars, but so can a whole mess of less valuable stuff."

"That's true," I nodded.

"There's just one problem I haven't been able to solve." He frowned.

"What's that?"

"How the hell am I gonna get to the john with this cast on my leg?"

I couldn't help laughing. "I'll ring for the attendant," I told him. "I'm sure this won't be the first time they've dealt with the problem."

While my fellow passenger was being helped to the men's room, I went for a walk through the cars to stretch my legs. At the bar in the club car stood two familiar individuals deep in conversation: Betty Decamp and Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. It was hard to imagine they'd met for the first time only the evening before, but of course people these days do manage to melt the social ice pretty quickly.

I smiled to myself. What a stroke of luck for them that her husband broke his leg. I decided not to stay for a drink, and as I was turning to leave saw our elderly fellow passenger tucked up to a foaming draft of beer, his nose and unlit pipe buried in his book.

When I returned to the compartment a few moments later, I had hardly sat down when Henry Decamp was standing in the doorway wanting to get by. I jumped up and he squeezed past me, sinking into his seat with a sigh of relief. I lifted his leg and put his foot back onto the seat next to me. "Thanks," he said.

I was very curious about many things concerning Henry Decamp, and glad the two of us were alone again. "Tell me," I said, hoping to get our earlier conversation back on the rails, so to speak, "what was this bet you mentioned earlier?"

"Bet? Oh, the bet." He seemed to ponder a moment, then told me there were some other things he wanted to sort out first.

"Such as?"

"A while ago," he said, "I asked you where you thought a jewel thief might hide his loot on a train like this. You didn't come up with the most *obvious* unobvious place."

"Which is?"

"My cast, of course."

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I stared at him. "Your cast?"

"Why not?"

"What a fabulous idea!" I cried. "No one would think of looking there."

"Of course they would," said Henry, waving my words away with a brusk movement of his hand. "Of course they would."

"But who would ever guess? You'd have to tell them yourself."

"Not really," he replied. "And that's where the bet comes in. Are you game?"

"What is it, then?" I asked him straight out.

"I'll wager you," he said slowly, "that without my actually telling anyone—except, of course, you—of this matter, before this day is over the authorities will believe the stolen jewels are hidden in my cast and have it removed. I'll bet you a hundred dollars."

His words confused me. "You mean they'll come to the conclusion that the jewels from the robbery are concealed in your cast without your *telling* them?"

"And have the cast removed. Is it a bet?"

"But what about your poor leg?"

"My leg will be fine. My leg will be happy to get out of this damn plaster for even a few minutes. What do you say?"

It sounded crazy, but somehow the bet appealed to me. I was extremely curious how he'd bring it off. Was it worth risking a hundred dollars just to find out? Of course it was.

"Agreed," I said, holding out my hand.

It may sound odd, but I was actually hoping Decamp would win the bet. I was intrigued to see how he'd manage it. In fact, he seemed so sure of himself I was convinced he *would* win. It hardly seemed like a real wager at all—more an act of faith. His handshake was firm in mine.

"Now tell me," I said, "how do you plan to do it?"

We were alone, but he leaned over and replied in a low voice: "By convincing *myself* that the jewels are in my cast. Once *I* believe they're in there, the Customs guys'll just take one look at my face and know I'm hiding something."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've never been able to hide anything from Customs inspectors," he told me. "If I'm carrying a lousy two extra ounces of booze, they'll read it in my face. So if I really *know* down in my guts that the jewels are in my cast, they'll guess it in a minute." He put one hand to his eyes. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to concentrate."

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Decamp then sank into a terrible silence, his brows knit, a darkness over his features. After a few minutes of concentration, he began to appear edgy and restless. I felt half mesmerized myself by the field of his concentration, so that both of us nearly jumped out of our seats as the door of the compartment suddenly shot open and Betty, looking herself a little like a surprised chicken in her spiky hairdo, stood in the doorway.

"Hi, ducks," she said, sitting down next to Henry and pecking his cheek.

"Careful," he snapped. "Don't jiggle the cast."

"I'm sorry, dear. Is it hurting?"

"Of course it is. What do you think?"

"Sorry to be alive," she shrugged. But her husband's bad mood didn't really seem to bother her in the least. After all, didn't she have a handsome new boy friend to give her all the attention and affection she needed?

Just then the young man in question returned to the compartment, too, and a moment later Monsieur Pipe & Book made his appearance. "We're arriving at the French border," he told us. "The Customs men are in the next car, so if you have anything you don't wish to declare," he chuckled conspiratorially, "now's the time to conceal it."

It was then that I saw the title of the book he was reading. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe.* "It seems we have another mystery buff in the car," I said, but before he could reply Decamp interrupted.

"'The Tell-Tale Heart'!" he exclaimed. "A perfect psychological study."

"I like that one, too," smiled the man with the pipe. "Who can ever forget that last scene? The happy, confident killer, with apparently nothing to fear, welcoming the police into his home, inviting them to stand on the very floorboards beneath which he's hidden the body of his victim. Then, completely without warning, he gives his evil deed away by imagining the heartbeat of his victim booming loudly enough for all to hear."

"Did you say the Customs officers are coming now?" asked Decamp.

"They're in the next car."

"Well, I've got nothing to hide," said the American flatly. "Nothing at all." His voice rose. "They can search to their hearts' content, they won't find an extra drop of booze, no dope, no wads of bank

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notes, and no stolen jewels." He looked over at me. "Could I borrow your newspaper?"

I handed him the newspaper, which he held up in front of his face. "Let 'em come," he growled.

This apparent display of nerves had its effect on the others. Betty Decamp looked for reassurance at Karl Heintz, who squeezed her hand—which he happened to be holding. An uneasy silence filled the compartment. To pass the time, I turned to the man seated next to me and asked him what business he was in.

"I'm semi-retired now," he told me, "but in fact I'm a detective."

"A detective?" I exclaimed, so loudly that the others looked our way. "Do *you* have any ideas on last night's crime? Mr. Decamp thinks the jewel thief might be on this train."

Smiling, he peered at us over his bifocals. "He or she might be anywhere at all, even in this very compartment."

"Well, it isn't me," said Henry Decamp firmly. "Would you believe a cat burglar with twenty pounds of plaster on his leg? My wife can't be the thief because she was with me the entire evening. Heintz there was walking by when I fell. So the three of us are in the clear."

"Were you conscious while they put on the cast?" asked the detective. "Not that it matters. From what you say, it's clear none of you is involved in this crime."

"Sure, I was conscious," said Decamp. "They attached a little nose mask to my palm. Whenever I wanted to, I just breathed in some gas."

Betty smiled. "Henry was a real laugh, he was. You should have seen him. Eyeballs rolled back in his head. And every time they started coming down again, someone would tell him to put the mask on his face and breathe. Then up they'd go, out of sight again. Remember, ducks?" She paused to pinch her husband's double chin. "Remember how you heard a dog barking far, far away and you cried out, 'Where's that dog?' as if the silly thing was about to bite you?"

"I don't remember that at all," Henry pouted. "Anyway, you can see that my wife and me and the Swiss kid there have perfect alibis. And I'm sure you—" he nodded in my direction, again having forgotten my name "—have one, too."

"I'm afraid not," I told him. "Nothing that would satisfy a judge or jury. I had an early dinner after a long day skiing and went straight to my hotel room. I fell asleep reading, and the next thing I knew it was morning and time to pack."

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"I believe you," said Henry Decamp generously, turning to the fifth passenger in our compartment. "Do *you* have an alibi for the evening?"

"None better than Monsieur's," he admitted. "I don't ski, but I had taken a great deal of fresh air and—if I may say it—wine, and also went to bed quite early."

"I believe you," said Decamp. "I believe we're all innocent of any crime and I'm the most innocent of all. But in spite of everything, if one of us is guilty, then the jewels would have to be on this train—and probably in this compartment. So if they're here, where do you think they are?" With this unexpected question, Decamp swept his arm to indicate the entire car and its occupants, from the row of suitcases and boxes we'd placed above us on the racks down to our shoes and socks.

"I have no idea whatsoever," said the detective, tapping his empty pipe against his hand.

As nobody else had one, either, an awkward silence fell.

Suddenly Decamp seemed to get an idea. "Listen," he said. "Before the Customs men get here, will you all do me a favor?"

After an instant of hesitation, we all nodded, more or less enthusiastically.

"Will you sign my cast? I've never broken any bones before, but I know it's a tradition to have your cast signed." He took a felt-tipped pen out of his pocket and handed it to me.

I have to admit I didn't find it at all pleasant signing my name to a plaster cast—but I did it to be sociable, as did the others. "Thank you," said Decamp when we were done. "I'll always remember this."

At that moment, the door of our compartment was jerked abruptly open and the face of a Customs inspector looked in. "Messieurs, dames, prepare yourselves for Customs inspection."

"Oh, we're well prepared," cried Henry Decamp jovially. "Tell me, Inspector, have they found the jewel thief yet?"

"What jewel thief, Monsieur?"

"You know—the one who robbed that hotel room last night and stole a million dollars' worth."

Now a second inspector appeared in the doorway. "Do you know something about this case, Monsieur?"

"Who, me?" asked Decamp in astonishment. "How would I know anything? At the time of the robbery I was tripping on the stairs outside my hotel and breaking my leg."

"And what time was that?" asked the Customs inspector.

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"Why—wasn't it around ten, Betty? Betty was with me at the time. She's my wife."

"Madame is your wife?" asked the inspector in such astonishment that I wondered whether he'd noticed her earlier in the club car with Karl Heintz.

"I don't remember the time exactly," Betty said. "Is it important? What time was the robbery?"

"But we're not here to discuss the robbery," cried the inspector impatiently, "we're here to find out whether you have anything to declare."

"Like what?" asked Decamp.

"Are you bringing anything of value into the country?"

Henry laughed. "I'll say. I'm bringing in this cast. It's worth plenty."

"Is it? Why?"

"Do you want to see my medical bill?"

"Yes," said the Customs inspector. "It would be interesting in case I break my leg to know what it costs for a cast."

"Well, the hotel footed the bill," Decamp said, "but whatever they paid, it was worth every cent." He pointed to his cast. "Ever seen such a great job? This cast has real character."

"An excellent job, Monsieur," agreed the inspector. "Now we will have to ask some of you to open your luggage." He looked up at the rows on the luggage racks. "Which bags are yours, Madame?" he asked Betty.

"That's one of them," she said, pointing to a brown suitcase squeezed between a leather briefcase and a plaid clothes bag. "I also have—" But the inspector interrupted her.

"And yours, Monsieur?" he asked me. I pointed to a bag at the end of the row between a red hatbox and the door.

"These folks aren't hiding anything," Decamp said in a loud, firm voice. "Save yourself some trouble. If we were a bunch of smugglers, or had stolen jewels in our luggage, you guys would know it. You're no amateurs. You'd see it in our faces. You know the signs of smugglers—nervous, jumpy."

"*Some* smugglers, Monsieur," said the inspector, suddenly seeming to take an interest in Henry Decamp, like a candle being ignited by a match.

"So do any of us fit that description?" the American continued. "No, not one of us. We're as innocent a bunch of tourists as you'll ever see. Look, these nice people have even signed my cast. You

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know what?" He reached in his pocket for his pen. "I'd like you to sign it, too. Go ahead—don't be afraid. It won't bite. Ha ha ha."

He held out the pen, then suddenly clutched his face in apparent terror. "My God!"

"Is something wrong, Monsieur?" asked the official.

"Something is—something is—" Decamp broke off and stared at his cast. "Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

"My cast. There. That sparkle on my cast."

"I don't see anything special, Monsieur." The puzzled official looked around at the rest of us, but we couldn't help him. There was nothing where Decamp was looking but the white cast resting on the seat with our signatures on it.

"The glitter! My God! The dazzling brilliance of the cast! Don't tell me you don't see it—it's blinding me. Blinding me!" Covering his eyes with both hands, Decamp rocked back and forth in his seat. "I can't stand it, I can't stand it!" he cried.

"Does your husband often have spells like this?" the Customs inspector asked Betty Decamp.

"I don't know," she said, as puzzled as he. "Maybe he's in pain from his leg."

The inspector looked out the window. "We're coming into a station now. I think perhaps your husband should leave the train and see a doctor."

"I think I know what's bothering him," I said suddenly, surprising myself by my boldness. "It's his cast. The stolen jewels are concealed in it."

My words were almost lost in the slow screeching of the train coming to a halt in the station. The inspectors looked at me in astonishment, then turned and looked with renewed interest at Henry Decamp. "Is this true, Monsieur? Do you have the jewels in your cast?" Even before Decamp had time to reply, one of the inspectors had disappeared from the doorway.

"Of course not." Decamp leaned angrily toward me. "Why did you tell them that?" he demanded in a loud whisper. "You've ruined everything."

Outside on the platform, a police whistle blew shrilly. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I got carried away. I was afraid—I mean, you really had me convinced." I looked out the window. Men were running.

A gendarme appeared at the door of our compartment.

"Please come with me, Monsieur," he said to Henry Decamp.

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"You're not going to take me off this train!" Decamp exclaimed in disbelief. "You're not going.to monkey around with my cast!"

"I don't think they will touch your cast, Monsieur, unless an X-ray shows some problem. But we are certainly going to take you and your wife off the train. We have some questions to ask you both."

"But the jewels aren't in my cast, I swear to you."

"We will also ask *you*, Monsieur, to detrain at this time," the inspector said to Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. "Please, all of you, take your luggage. Someone is coming aboard to assist Monsieur."

I leaned across and whispered to Decamp, "You've done brilliantly. You've won the bet. Even if they only X-ray the cast, you've won."

"But you spoiled everything! You *told* them the jewels were in the cast!"

"But *you* didn't, and that was the bet. Your emotion was so real, your acting so brilliant, you had me utterly convinced. Even if I'd said nothing, the inspectors would have reached the same conclusion in a minute or two."

"Are you sure?" asked Decamp, doubtful. "Was I that good?"

"*Good?* Poe himself couldn't have done better."

Decamp looked down modestly. "If they'd signed my cast, it might have been something of a plus." He sighed. "Well, you can't win 'em all."

"But sometimes you can." I took out my wallet and removed some bills. "Before you go, here's the money I owe you for our bet. I hope Swiss francs will be all right. Perhaps this will make up for any inconvenience I've caused you by my stupidity."

"Hey, you're all right," said Decamp. "Only I wish you'd come with us. I'd like you to see their faces when they find out they got the wrong guy."

"I'd love to come," I assured him, "but my wife is meeting me in Paris."

He winked at me broadly. "So's mine."

I stared at him in astonishment.

A few minutes later a stretcher was brought to carry the American from the train. From our suddenly depleted compartment I watched the three of them—Henry, his mistress Betty, and the Swiss—make their way down the platform, surrounded by gendarmes.

"Oh, look," said the elderly detective behind me. "Madame has forgotten her hatbox."

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I glanced up and saw the red hatbox on the luggage rack. "I'll take it to her," I told him. "They haven't gone far."

"I wonder what kind of hat she can wear with that hair style," he wondered aloud.

"I wouldn't know."

I took the hatbox down and was starting out the door when suddenly a gendarme stood blocking my way.

"Don't worry," said the old detective, "this fellow will take it to her. You don't want to miss the train."

"Oh, no," I stammered, "I insist. It's my duty as a gentleman."

"But doesn't it seem like a rather strange hatbox to you?" asked the detective. "Shake it. Does it feel like there are only hats inside?"

"What else would there be?"

"Jewels, perhaps? In a false bottom?"

"You mean—" I gasped "—you mean that that young lady is the jewel thief?"

"No, Monsieur," he said. "It isn't her hatbox. I guessed that as soon as I realized she could not wear any hat over that style of hair."

"Then it's his, Decamp's. Or it belongs to Mr. Muehlendorfer."

"No, the air-ticket stub on the hatbox is the number consecutive to the one on your suitcase. The hatbox is yours."

I sank back down in my seat. They had me. They had me. But had he actually deduced my guilt from such a stupid clue as that girl's hairstyle?

"That and one other detail," he told me. "A detail I knew but the gendarmes are learning only now."

"Which is?"

"The reason I was sure Henry Decamp would not have the gems concealed in his cast, in spite of what you said, is because he was the victim of the robbery, not its perpetrator."

As he said this, a dozen pieces of a puzzle I'd not even known existed suddenly came together in my brain. I stood up. "I salute you, Monsieur," I said in French.

"Thank you," he nodded. "However, I do have one question, if I may."

"Please."

"Why did you, a man, use a lady's red hatbox to conceal the stolen jewels?"

His words took me by surprise. "No choice," I shrugged. "Mother wanted the blue."

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a *NEW* short story by

STRINGFELLOW FORBES

"You're Ed," Yolanda said, and he about fell down. It wasn't just that she knew his name—he found out later that she read it off the tag on his work shirt—but what she was saying: he was the one. And she was serious about it, sweet and serious and positive—not thinking, like with the others, but sure and like she was home and resting after a long time . . . .

WALKING LONESOME

by STRINGFELLOW FORBES

Walking lonesome,
setting those little
soft suede boots
straight on down the line,
one line, one step at a time,
walking lonesome.

Lonesome baby,
can't you see
I'm the one and you're for me?

I guess I'll be walking lonesome now.

Scratch that. That's disgusting, quoting your own song at a time like this.

Okay. Give me a minute.

Well, but you know that's what she was like, she just had a lonesome look. She held her head up, with all that black hair floating, and she looked right at you like she was trying to decide if you were the one that did it, whatever it was somebody did that hurt her so

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bad. She was careful, because it was deep and she didn't want to disturb it. And that phrase just came into my mind when I saw her.

I'm no musician—I never wrote songs before I knew her. Maybe knock around on the piano a little, do a little chording and hum. But everybody does that. Yolanda was just so unusual that unusual things began happening.

She came to that party—I know, don't remind me, another song.

"She came to the party with somebody else
but she left, she left with me."

The party was at *Eu*gene's house. We always say it that way, *Eu*gene, because of the way our mothers used to call us when we'd been bad—"*You,* Edward, come in this house this minute," you know? You know that way that mothers do?

Well, Eugene has this big old house where all the bands can stay when they're in town. It's a real dump, the upstairs rooms full of mattresses on the floor, broken-spring furniture downstairs, and a great big kitchen with a table in it where about twelve people can eat.

Eugene has a thing about the kitchen. He won't let anybody else cook in it and he keeps it scrubbed and clean all the time. It's real peculiar, that old wreck of a house, weeds in the yard, bottles in all the corners, bedspreads hung over all this junky furniture to hide it, and then this clean kitchen and all the good food he can make. I think that's why the boys keep going there. Makes 'em feel taken care of, and that's not so usual on the road. So they come in and the guys that booked them will say go to this hotel or that hotel, but they'll say naw, they guess they'll go to Eugene's. He used to play, see, but he got to drinking and worse and he lost out, never could get with a band that was any good. He still plays guitar some, but he says he'd rather cook. He listens good and there's always a lot of music at Eugene's.

The party Yolanda showed up at was one of those regular parties—beer, smoking, tapes playing loud, dealing upstairs in the bedrooms. I just went because my buddy said I could and I'd been off a day or two and was getting tired of TV. So I put on my plant uniform and unbuttoned the shirt and tied on a few chains and bandanas, a little leather. I was feeling mad at the plant because of the layoffs they were starting then and I thought I'd trash their uniform a little. These parties, you let yourself go, show your originality.

She was there.

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She's got blue eyes, did you notice that? Black hair and blue eyes.

She wasn't singing then, that came later. They'd always said her voice was too little and they'd only let her do some back-up. But she'd come off the road after the accident and she was working a regular nine-to-five job at a cleaner's. Maybe that was why she noticed me. I mean, I was wearing somebody's dark-green uniform and that meant I was working regular. That bunch didn't do much working—not in uniforms.

They all knew her and knew she used to be with J.D. And they'd come up sort of respectful and say, " 'Lo, Yolanda," and she'd look at them like she was considering and pass on by. I saw her coming and I went to meet her, to sort of put myself in her way.

"You're Ed," she said, and I about fell down. It wasn't just that she knew my name—I found out later that she read it off the tag on my work shirt—but what she was saying: I was the one. And she was serious about it, sweet and serious and positive—not thinking, like with the others, but sure and like she was home and resting after a long time.

I guess we talked a little bit, I don't remember. But we left almost right away and went to my place. We been together since then.

I went on back to work soon after that and then we moved. I really only had a room in another guy's apartment and I wanted a nice place for us to live in. She never complained, not Yolanda. She was like a princess—even her name was like she was a lost princess. And she took what you gave her or she didn't take it.

It was Eugene, actually, found it. He had a friend—you have to understand there's nothing in the whole world for Eugene but friends—and he knew this divorced lady wanted to make her upstairs into an apartment so she could bring in a little income and not have to leave her kids to go out to work. So Eugene said if I'd help her with some carpentry and build on an outside stairway, she'd let us rent the second floor a little cheaper.

So that's where we moved, Yolanda and me. I was working regular and she had her job, we were always busy. We bought things for the house, we had a whole setup—dishes, sheets and towels. I said all we needed was to have the paper flapped on the doorstep every day and the mailbox full of bills and we'd be just like everybody used to be. Yolanda said not to make jokes, we were fine.

Then the next layoff period, I went to my boss and said I really didn't want to go off and wasn't there something he could do. So

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they offered me the late shift, which meant I'd have to work to midnight. I took it.

It was a little hard on Yolanda, I admit that. Either she'd stay up late to have supper when I got home or—well, there wasn't much "or" about it. We had the weekends but we didn't see much of each other during the week.

That's when I wrote the songs. The lady downstairs had a piano, a real big one, she used to live good. I would sometimes stay with the kids while she went shopping, I had a lot of time in the mornings now. I didn't *write* the songs, they came to me, and I sang 'em for the lady and the kids. To me it was no big deal, I never thought there'd be any money in it.

For a long time I couldn't understand how Yolanda came to be singing them. Turned out the lady was learning them—they meant a lot to her because she was divorced, you know, and that's no fun—and she sang 'em to Yolanda sometimes when I was at work.

First I knew about anything was the lady began looking at me funny and wouldn't ask me downstairs any more. And then one of my buddies from the old shift said he'd heard Yolanda sing at Archie's with a little pick-up band.

She never tried to hide it, I'll say that straight out. But she was always home when I came in—just more awake than she used to be, maybe. Then when they got the recording offer, she asked me about it.

I'd heard her by this time and I liked it. The boys were mostly kids Eugene knew. They'd never played together before but he'd helped them and they had a new sound—it's not so new since then but that quiet little slappy rhythm was nice, anybody could see that. And Yolanda—all she needed was a good mike and a good song. She had her own simple style, you always knew exactly what she was singing about. Archie said he'd never heard it so quiet at his place as it used to be in the beginning when Yolanda sang.

I kept on working, but I was writing now in the mornings. The woman downstairs, Mrs. Heath—Ella, we call her—got over worrying she'd been wrong to give out my songs. She could see I didn't mind if Yolanda was out singing when I was at the plant. So she let me use the piano again and the songs kept on coming. Just wrote themselves. "Party, Party, Just Us Two" and "Sweetfire Dawnlight Love." "Ripstepping" and "Like Midnight Coffee." Yeah, "Lost Again," too—all those. It was weird.

Well, Yolanda got to be known—and that's when he came back.

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I know the papers all said he came back from the dead, but he hadn't really been dead. But *she* thought he was dead and you can understand how it hit her.

J.D. Josh Damon. He was always a— Look, are you putting down the bad words? I don't want to say anything too gross if it goes in the record. I'd never set eyes on Josh Damon—not when he was alive, that is—but he never was a nice man, only she couldn't see it before. When she got to know him, he had this big-name band, records on the radio everywhere, writeups in the papers, and lots of money. She was real young when she hooked up with him, you can't expect she'd know any better. But she must have learned to hate drugs and drinking, and I know she hated motorcycles, she still does. She'll say "He rides a *bike*" like she was saying "He beats his wife."

It was maybe five years ago. J.D. was in West Virginia. Yolanda had stayed out in California. She wasn't too well, if you want the truth, some trouble after an abortion or something like that. All I know is she'd been in the hospital.

J.D. bought a bike out there in West Virginia. It was more than a bike, it was a *machine,* a real bad bull motorcycle. I don't know why, maybe he liked the mountain roads. He had so much money he could buy a thing like that, use it for a week or two while he was in town, and give it away. Or his manager would sell it. And then he was beginning not to have so much money any more because he spent so much. It costs, you know, to rent a whole floor of hotel rooms and then pay the damage from the parties.

Everyone thought he was killed in that crash up in the mountains. After all, there were two bodies and he'd gone off with Lew, his drummer. But Yolanda said he told her they'd stopped and picked up a hitchhiker. So there were *three* on it when it crashed. Lew and the hitchhiker were the ones burned to death in the accident. J.D. walked away.

I can't really explain it, how he could of done that. But he had a lot of troubles by then, and he was using a lot. He may just have been stoned and didn't know what he was doing. Maybe he felt tired of it all, or maybe he thought he couldn't last much longer and he'd just get out while he had the chance.

Yolanda didn't know him at first when he came back. He'd cut off his beard and he was sloppy fat and boozing. But he couldn't stay away when he heard his old girl friend was making it on her own. He hadn't been doing too good drifting around. And he was mad at

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everybody because his records really sold when people thought he'd been killed and he couldn't get anything out of that. I mean, if he called his manager and said he was alive and he wanted a cut, how could he explain—well, a lot of things? But anyway, he found Yolanda, sweet Yolanda, that used to love him so.

I didn't really understand it at first, that something was wrong—but Yolanda changed. She wasn't a princess any more, looking for what was down inside you. She knew. That is, she knew now that it wasn't something magical that had been taken away from her, she wasn't so removed any more and always thinking about that. And she was doing so much herself, and that changes people. She really liked the songs, the rehearsals, the gigs here in town. She wouldn't travel, you probably know that. She said she couldn't go back to that, if people wanted to hear her they could come to Archie's or the Bear Hall or Cattail Ruby's.

I kept on working at the plant, out of superstition or something. They kidded me about it down there but—well, I don't know, I was a working man and what if the songs stopped? I mean, I never could make up any of them on purpose. So I'd sometimes go to rehearsals in the mornings and sometimes I'd catch the last set wherever they were playing that night. Or I'd go on home and go to sleep. Or they'd quit early and we'd both wind up at home. We could work it out a lot of ways to have time together and we didn't think much about it.

Then that changed. She'd say, "No, don't come tonight, you heard me sing it just now." Or I'd get there and meet her leaving and she'd say, "Let's go, I don't feel good." Eugene talked to me one day, said Yolanda didn't look right, I should take her on a little vacation. I told him I didn't *have* vacation time just then and he said, "Look, look at her."

They were going through "Lost Again."

They were rehearsing, see, and I was listening to the harmony and this one place in the middle section, but when Eugene said that, I looked at Yolanda. And I really saw that she didn't have that straight-up little swing any more, she wasn't meaning the words like she was saying them, like had been so good before. She was gone, she was just not there.

I think now that I was telling myself something with those songs, they were things I knew but I couldn't let them out any other way.

This is tiring me out. Let's get finished.

No, I didn't know why things had changed, *she* had changed, but

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Yolanda told me some of it and the rest I figured out myself. All except what happened.

He was hitting her up for money, simple as that. He hung around and saw how good she was doing and then he showed himself to her. I think she probably didn't know him—how would she expect him to turn up, he was dead out in West Virginia. He was able to prove it to her, though, who he was, and he could still make her do what he wanted her to.

But he took away—what? Her central thing, her loss. It had been so tragic, him cut off in his youth, dying in flames so far away, no chance for them to part. Maybe they'd had a fight when she saw him last and she'd never made it up with him. She didn't want him *back,* especially not like he was, but she wanted the whole thing in West Virginia not to have happened.

Maybe this could explain why she'd push him down those steps outside our apartment. It's my view she didn't want him to come in where I was, where we both lived—just he shouldn't come into our home. But I can't explain why she'd run back into the kitchen for a knife and go down and stab him so many times when he was lying there at the bottom with a concussion like you say she did. The police had already taken her away when my buddy dropped me off after work.

It won't matter to Yolanda what happens to her now. She's gone away somewhere safe inside herself.

For me, you don't know you're lonesome until you've been *with* somebody. No, I don't think I'll be writing songs any more. I know too much now, there's nothing left to tell myself.

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Segar flipped quickly through the passport. "Only twenty-two? So young to be traveling alone."

"I graduated from college in May," Jennifer replied. "I'm on my own now."

"I see." Segar hesitated for a moment and then returned to the passport. "If you insist on continuing up this road, look for a village named Gravita and ask for Michael Vlado. He is the leader of the Gypsies there. He and his wife will take you in for the night . . ."

MURDER OF A GYPSY KING

by EDWARD D. HOCH

On the long, lonely highway into Bucharest that sunny August afternoon, Jennifer Beatty suddenly changed her mind. She ignored the arrow that read BUCURESTI 50 KM and took a left fork that ran up the side of a hill toward the dense forest beyond. She hadn't really been going to Bucharest, anyway. She was running away, and she had a feeling Peter would come looking for her before too long—if for no other reason than that she'd stolen his motorcycle when she took off the previous night from a resort town on the Black Sea.

Now, feeling the heat of its engine between her legs, she remembered the good times they'd had touring the Balkans all summer, moving from the Greek Islands up through Macedonia and the western tip of Turkey, then up the coastline through Bulgaria and into Romania. Travel in the Eastern Bloc countries had eased considerably, even for Americans, and Jennifer had ridden the back of Peter's motorcycle for so long that when the inevitable finish came

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it seemed natural for her to take it. She had no other transportation and very little money.

The road ahead seemed to climb relentlessly, and for the first time she wondered if she'd made the right choice in leaving the highway. She slowed the motorcycle to a stop by the side of the road just as a black military-staff car appeared ahead at the crest of the hill. It paused next to her and a man in military uniform rolled down the window. "Are you lost?" he asked, using some of the first words she'd learned from her Romanian phrase book.

There was a time just a few weeks back when she wouldn't have been able to respond without consulting the book, but now she was becoming quite proficient in the language. "I'm only traveling through," she told him.

"An American?"

"Yes."

He was a handsome man in his forties, who reminded her a bit of her Uncle George back home. "I am Captain Segar of the district police," he told her. "This road leads into the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. There is nothing ahead but a few farming communities and Gypsy villages."

"Gypsies!" Jennifer was an incurable romantic. "Do they travel in caravans and tell fortunes?"

He looked at her. "These Gypsies farm the land and raise horses. They will not harm you, but still it is not safe for a young woman to travel these back roads by herself. Do you have a passport?"

She removed it from her saddlebag and handed it to him, wondering if Peter might have reported the stolen motorcycle to the local police. "You'll find it in order."

He flipped quickly through the pages. "It is a good picture of you. Only twenty-two? So young to be traveling alone."

"I graduated from college in May," she replied. "I'm on my own now."

"I see." He hesitated for a moment and then returned the passport. "If you insist on continuing up this road, look for a village named Gravita and ask for Michael Vlado. He is the leader of the Gypsies there. He and his wife will take you in for the night."

"Thank you," she said.

He waved as he pulled away and continued down the hill.

Toward evening, Jennifer reached the village of Gravita. She'd

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been uncertain about whether to stop, but with the coming of twilight a pause for the night seemed best.

A Gypsy working in a field directed her to Michael Vlado's farm, not without some difficulty. It hadn't occurred to her that the residents of Gravita would speak the Romany Gypsy tongue rather than the nation's official language. When she reached the Vlado farm, she was relieved to find them willing and able to converse in the language she knew.

It was a pleasant-looking woman who responded to her knock, surprised to find a late caller on the doorstep.

"I'm touring through here on my motorcycle," Jennifer quickly explained. "I met a police officer named Segar on the road and he told me I might find a night's lodging with Michael Vlado."

"I am Rosanna, Michael's wife," the woman said. "He's putting the horses away. Please come in."

"I'm an American," Jennifer explained. "I've been traveling through the Balkans this summer. My name is Jennifer Beatty."

"Alone? On a motorcycle? Come sit down. You must be hungry. We have much food left from dinner."

The house was neat and homey, with colorful Gypsy good-luck symbols decorating the walls—otherwise the residents could have been any European nationality. Jennifer noticed a work table with carefully carved wooden animals in various stages of completion. "Did you do these?" she asked. "They're lovely."

Rosanna beamed. "I carved them to sell at the shops in the village."

A few minutes later the back door swung open and a tall Gypsy with a weathered complexion entered. "I saw a motorcycle outside," he said. "We have a visitor." Jennifer noticed the single earring in his left ear.

"My husband, Michael," Rosanna announced. "This is a young American named Jennifer Beatty. She's been touring the Balkans on her motorcycle and met Captain Segar on the road."

"He was such a nice man," Jennifer said. "He advised me to stop here overnight. But I'd hate to be a burden—"

"You are no burden," Michael assured her. "Perhaps Rosanna and I will learn something of America."

She accepted their offer of food, realizing for the first time how hungry she was. She told them of her life back home and of her summer in the Balkans, omitting any mention of Peter. Finally, as the hour grew late, Rosanna showed her to an upstairs bedroom

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where a four-poster bed with a down comforter put her to sleep within minutes.

She awakened to the sound of horses beneath her window. It was daylight and her watch showed the time to be well after eight. She hadn't slept so late all summer. Stretching, she slid out of bed and made her way to the bathroom down the hall.

Hearing her shut the door, Rosanna climbed the stairs and called, "Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, thank you!"

"We're eating breakfast now if you want to join us."

Throwing on her jeans and T-shirt, Jennifer went downstairs and found Michael at the table, finishing a plate of ham and eggs. "Everything about this place surprises me," she told him as Rosanna brought a plate for her. "You eat American food for breakfast, you have flush toilets, you're not up at dawn like other farmers—"

Michael and Rosanna laughed. "The American breakfast is for you," Rosanna said. "Michael has been up and working since dawn. And only our house and that of King Carranza have flush toilets and septic tanks. The rest of the villagers still use outhouses. Of course, we all depend on well water."

"Who is King Carranza?"

"The leader of our particular tribe of Gypsies," Michael explained. "Although these days he's too ill to do much leading. Until a runaway horse crippled him, he was a blacksmith with the strength of ten men."

"I'd like to meet him. A Gypsy leader!" Then she remembered what Captain Segar had said. "But you're the leader, aren't you?"

"I preside over the Gypsy court—the *kris*. I make a number of day-to-day decisions. But I consult with King Carranza on all important matters." He made a sudden decision. "If you really would like to meet him, you can do so before you leave. I'll be going over there later this morning."

"You'd take me with you?"

Michael exchanged a look with his wife. "Yes. It would be all right. King Carranza likes to greet visitors to our village."

After breakfast, Jennifer followed Michael outside. "I should move the motorcycle out of the way."

"Put it in the shed," Michael suggested, motioning toward an outbuilding some hundred feet away.

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Jennifer climbed onto the motorcycle and started it, only to have it stall. Embarrassed, she gunned it a second time and rode it to the shed. Michael followed along on foot.

"Did you raise all these horses?" she asked, watching a pair of colts frolicking in the pasture after she parked the motorcycle.

"Most of them. Some I keep here to train for others. We race them at fairs and such."

"It sounds exciting."

"It's very dull. Once, though, we took a racehorse to Moscow, to their big track at the Hippodrome. That was exciting. Captain Segar came with us."

"Moscow!" She shook her head. "I have such a dull life back home."

"But over here it is exciting, no?"

She turned quickly, detecting some change in his voice. "What do you mean?"

"Stealing your boyfriend's motorcycle is exciting?"

"How did you—? What are you talking about?"

He smiled slightly at her surprise. "It is not difficult to surmise. The saddlebags have the initials *P.F.* Hardly the initials of Jennifer Beatty. I assume that's your real name because Captain Segar certainly would have checked your passport if he stopped you along the road, and you wouldn't give one name to him and another to me. You had difficulty starting the cold engine just now, showing some unfamiliarity with the machine, hardly as if you've been driving it across the Balkans for two months. Would you be traveling all over with a woman friend who happened to own a motorcycle? Very doubtful. A male, a boyfriend, is most likely. It's his motorcycle, but you have it. Did he sell or give it to you, or did you steal it? I'd say the latter as the most likely possibility, especially since the key you used to start it seems to be still attached to a very masculine keyring."

She glanced down at the keys still in her hand and blushed when she saw Peter's tiny nude in pink plastic dangling from it. "You sound like Sherlock Holmes."

He laughed. "Better than being compared to Dracula, I suppose. In these mountains, the Count is more popular than Holmes—they've even made a tourist attraction out of him."

"What else do you know about me?"

"Well, you speak the language well enough so I know you didn't cross the border yesterday. You and your boyfriend must have been living here at least for a few months."

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"Three weeks," she told him. "I'm a fast learner."

"You are indeed, Jennifer. Do you want to tell me why you left him?"

"It didn't work out. He got so he was shooting dope every night and that's not my scene. I left him in Vasile, on the Black Sea."

"A charming place. And the motorcycle?"

"I had no transportation and virtually no money. It was my only way out. I left him a note yesterday morning and took off."

"Will he come looking for you?"

"I don't know."

They walked across the fields to the only house in sight that was larger than Michael's. On the porch they found King Carranza seated in his wheelchair. Jennifer stared at his powerful arms and shoulders and the iron-grey hair that twined around his head like a crown. It was a full minute before her eyes strayed to his crippled legs, hidden by a faded horse blanket.

"It's a great pleasure to meet you," she said, but he only smiled and nodded in response.

"King Carranza speaks Romany," Michael explained. "He has never found it necessary to learn the local language."

"Does he live here alone?"

"Yes. His sister comes in and cooks for him. He still works in the blacksmith shop around the back of the house. He had a wife, but she is gone now."

"Dead?"

"Gone," Michael repeated. He said a few words to the king, conveying Jennifer's greeting from America. Then he translated the response for her. She liked the king and the kindly way he studied her, and she felt regret that he was confined to a wheelchair.

A few minutes later, as they watched him at work in his blacksmith shop, she tempered her initial feeling a bit. With his powerful arms, he could do more than most able-bodied men she knew, including Peter, who was virtually helpless in the real world.

Michael took her around to meet others in the village. A couple named Steven and Maria Fetesti, married only a year and working together on their tiny farm, especially impressed her. They spoke Romanian, as did many of the younger Gypsies, and she was pleased to be able to converse with them directly.

"One more stop," Michael said as they left the Fetestis. "I want

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you to see a shop in the village. It's where my wife's carved animals are sold."

The shop was run by a thin, bearded man named Ivan Raski. Somehow he seemed different from the others, and the Romanian he spoke was not as clear or as intelligible. But his shop was a delight. Jennifer wandered around, studying the mostly handmade crafts, wishing she had the money to buy something.

"Are they all made in the village?" she asked Michael as they were leaving.

"Almost all. Some come from a neighboring village."

"But do enough tourists come through here to buy them?"

"A few travel this road, but we buy many of these things ourselves. Blankets to keep us warm in winter, Gypsy skirts and blouses, wooden toys for the children. We are almost self-sufficient here."

"This is free enterprise—doesn't the Communist government object?"

"Not on this small a scale. The Gypsies in the cities have some degree of regulation. Up here they rarely bother us. Captain Segar looks after our interests."

They strolled back toward Michael's farm, Jennifer all too aware that she'd soon be leaving this idyllic place with no firm destination in mind.

"Ivan Raski didn't seem like the others," she observed. "Is he a Gypsy?"

"No, he's Russian. He came here some years ago and we took him in. This is not a closed community."

"Could I stay here for a time?"

"I don't know. Would you be happy here? You would have to do some work, on my farm or elsewhere."

"I might like that."

Michael stopped and studied her. "Suppose you stay for another night and we'll both think it over."

She was pleased at his reply and was about to accept the offer when they heard a woman scream. Michael froze, then turned toward the sound. A middle-aged Gypsy woman was running toward them across the field from the direction of King Carranza's house.

"It's Carranza's sister Theresa," Michael said. "Something's wrong!"

They ran to meet her and she fell to the ground at Michael's feet, gasping for breath. "He's dead!" she screamed. "My brother has been murdered . . .!"

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It was true. King Carranza was dead. He lay in a pool of blood on the living-room floor next to his overturned wheelchair. The apparent murder weapon, a heavy blacksmith's hammer, was on the floor nearby. Jennifer took one look and buried her face in her hands.

"Stay outside," Michael told her. "Don't look."

"I'm all right," she insisted, but she kept her eyes averted.

He turned to Theresa Carranza, who was still stiff with terror. "Try to tell me what happened."

"I came over to see him as I do every morning. I was later than usual today because my son has a little fever. I found him—like this!"

"No one else was here?"

"No one!"

For the first time, he seemed to notice drawers that had been pulled open, papers strewn about. "It looks like a robbery." He turned to Jennifer. "Run back to my house and tell Rosanna what has happened. Tell her we need people here—Fetesti, Raski, she'll know who else."

"All right."

She ran across the fields, glad to be away from the dead king and his grieving sister. When she broke the news to Michael's wife, the blood seemed to drain from Rosanna's face. Then she steadied herself and said, "It is like losing a father. What did Michael tell me to do?"

"He needs people to help. He mentioned Fetesti and Raski. He said you'd know others."

Rosanna nodded, wrapping a shawl around her though the morning was warming nicely. "Tell him I'll get help and come quickly. Everyone will be there."

The word spread quickly and soon after Jennifer returned to the Carranza house the crowd began to gather. She hadn't imagined so many people lived in the village. Every man, woman, and child seemed to be there. Michael went out on the porch and spoke to them. Though she couldn't understand the words, she knew by the crowd's reaction that he was telling them what they already knew—that their king had been killed by someone unknown. Their reaction was a mixture of grief and anger.

"What are they saying?" she asked Steven Fetesti.

"They must find the killer. No one can believe it was one of us. Only an outsider could have done something so terrible."

Rosanna was comforting the dead man's sister while others went

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about the work of removing King Carranza's body. After a brief conversation with some of the others, Michael placed a telephone call to Captain Segar. He promised to come at once, though it was a two-hour drive from his office in town.

As the body was removed, Michael examined the house. "Can you tell if anything has been stolen?" he asked Theresa.

She went through the downstairs rooms, including the bedroom and bathroom. "He had some money he kept here—gold jewelry and coins, as well as paper money he earned from smithing. It seems to be gone."

"Could it be upstairs?"

"He hasn't used the upstairs since his accident years ago. He had some things stored up there, that's all." But she went up to inspect it, anyway, with Rosanna, and they reported back that the upstairs storage area appeared untouched. The thief and murderer had apparently confined his activities to the ground floor.

In the crowd outside, with tensions running high, a fight had broken out. A big Gypsy Jennifer didn't know had started tussling with Ivan Raski, the little Russian shopkeeper. Michael sprang out the door and leaped off the porch, landing on the combatants and carrying them both to the ground. Then he yanked them apart by sheer force. "What's this about?" he shouted at them in Romanian.

The Gypsy said something Jennifer could not catch, but his meaning was all too clear when Michael responded angrily, "Why? Is Ivan to be suspected merely because he is not one of us? This girl and I were in his shop very near the time the killing must have taken place—he is not the one we seek!"

It was less than five minutes later when Rosanna spotted the drops of blood near the back door and called Michael. "Perhaps King Carranza managed to wound his attacker," she suggested.

"It is a possibility," he admitted. "It couldn't be Carranza's blood this far from where Theresa found him."

"Why not?" Jennifer asked. "His blood might have splattered on his killer."

"These drops are perfectly shaped and not yet dry. They dripped from an open wound. See—here's another on the back steps." When Fetesti came to observe, Michael told him, "Go get your dogs. They are good trackers. They will lead us in the right direction."

The young Gypsy returned in minutes with two shaggy beagles. At first they seemed uninterested in the bloodstains, caught up

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instead by the odors in the kitchen, but Steven yanked on their leashes and finally managed to direct their attention. The dogs went out the back door and headed across the field toward the woods, pulling their master behind them.

"Come along," Michael said to Jennifer.

"Don't you need a gun?"

"If he's still there, it means he's too badly wounded to put up a fight. He used Carranza's hammer for the killing, remember—that implies he has no other weapon."

They followed the dogs into the woods and then out the other side. There was another open field beyond, leading down a gently sloping hill to a dirt road. The dogs hesitated a bit here, but finally picked up the scent again. Michael and Steven followed them to a narrow culvert along the side of the road.

"There he is," Michael said, pointing. "Stay back, Jennifer."

A sandy-haired young man in jeans and a striped T-shirt lay in the culvert. Michael bent over him and went rapidly through his pockets. "German passport in the name of Hans Funken. Probably died from loss of blood. The body's still warm."

Jennifer could see the bloody wound in the young stranger's side as she edged closer to the culvert. "Was he shot?" she asked.

"It looks more like a knife wound," Michael said, continuing to search the body. In one pocket he found two gold coins. "These were Carranza's. No one else would have had coins this old."

"But why would he kill him?" she asked.

"It was probably a simple burglary that went bad. Carranza was an expert at knife-throwing. He hit this fellow with a blade and the man stopped to beat his head in before he fled. I suppose he had been wandering across the countryside and picked Carranza's house because it was the largest in the village." Michael stared off at the horizon.

"You were very close to him, weren't you?"

"He was like a father to me." Michael turned back to Steven. "Stay with the body. I'll send a truck around to carry him back."

As they returned to the Carranza house the way they had come, Jennifer asked, "Will you be the new king?"

"Usually the old king passes on his medallion and ring—the symbols of his office—to a chosen successor. King Carranza had no children, and though I acted in his place on the Council of Elders many times he never chose me to succeed him. It will be up to the Council to name a new king. But that won't come until after his funeral

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ceremony. When a king of a Gypsy clan dies, there is often a gathering of other clans in the area. It is a mournful occasion but a festive one, too."

At the Carranza house Michael dispatched two of the men to help Steven Fetesti with the body. Ivan Raski listened to Michael's account of the discovery. "A stab wound, you say?"

"It appeared so. We must search for a second weapon. You remember how skilled Carranza was with a thrown knife."

"As are many Roms," Raski agreed.

Jennifer watched them search beneath the chairs and tables in the sitting room, then wandered out to the kitchen and began searching there, as much to remove herself from the death room as for any other reason. The body was gone now, but the terrible bloodstains still soiled the carpet. Out here at least there were no bloodstains except those by the stove and the back door.

She spotted the knife almost at once, by the woodpile next to the stove. "Michael!" she called. "Here it is!"

He hurried into the kitchen, with Raski close behind. "Yes, I recognize it," he told her, picking it up carefully. "It was his favorite throwing knife. He wore it beneath the sash around his waist."

Raski turned to look in at the overturned wheelchair. It was in a direct line with the stove. "He hurled the knife and caught the killer as he was going out the door."

"Perhaps," Michael said.

Jennifer watched him as he studied the carpet in the short hallway between the living room and the kitchen. He opened a door and glanced in at the bathroom. "Anything?" she asked him.

"No," he said, shutting the door.

He was interrupted by the arrival of a car outside. Jennifer could see by his face that he recognized the sound of the motor, and he hurried to greet the new arrival. "It's Captain Segar," Ivan Raski explained.

She saw the uniformed man climb out from behind the wheel. There was someone with him in the car and Jennifer assumed it was one of his deputies. Segar shook hands with Michael as they met in front of the house. "My dear friend," he said, "I know how much Carranza meant to you."

"He was our king," Michael said simply. "There will never be another like him."

Then Segar's gaze swept the crowd in front of Carranza's house

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and settled on Jennifer. "I've brought someone who is looking for you," he announced. The other man had emerged from the car and was walking toward her. She saw with a shock of fear that it was Peter Fry.

"So this is where I find you," he growled. "In a Gypsy camp!"

"Peter, you—"

He towered above her, his fists clenched as if he might strike her at any moment. "You deserted me and stole my motorcycle! Where is it?"

"It's safe, in Michael's shed."

"Michael, is it? You didn't waste any time, did you?"

"Peter, stop acting childish." She was aware that several of the villagers were close enough to overhear them.

"Why did you leave me?"

"I thought the note I left made everything clear. How did you find me?"

"I borrowed a car from a friend and kept asking people along the way. A girl like you alone on a motorcycle attracts attention. Finally I saw this government car down the hill and asked Captain Segar if he'd seen anyone answering your description. He told me he'd met you on the road yesterday and directed you here. He was on his way here to investigate a killing, so I left the car and rode along with him."

"I'll return your motorcycle and you can go," she told him, turning to walk away. He grabbed her arm and spun her around.

Suddenly Michael was at her side, pulling Peter's hand away. "Is there some problem here?"

"She's going back with me," Peter said.

"Not unless she wants to." Michael turned to Jennifer. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I want to stay here with you, I think. At least for a while."

Michael sighed. "Let's go inside and talk it over."

They'd brought back the dead man and Steven Fetesti helped to unload him from the truck and lay him on the ground. When one of the Gypsies tried to kick the body, Segar quickly intervened. "Keep back, everyone. Was there any identification on him?"

Michael handed over the German passport he'd found. "His name is Hans Funken. He must have been passing through the area and

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picked the Carranza house to rob because it was the largest in the village. We found these two coins in his pocket but nothing else."

"Does anyone remember seeing him around?" Segar asked the Gypsies. Several shook their heads. No one seemed to have known or seen him before.

Jennifer and Peter followed the others into the house, where Theresa sat in grieving silence in a corner of the room. "There must be preparation for the funeral," Maria Fetesti said softly.

Michael nodded. "Of course. Notify those from the nearby tribes who might want to attend and have some of the men begin to erect tents."

Peter sat down next to Jennifer while the others made plans. "I'm sorry I grabbed you like that, but I want you to come back with me."

"I don't think so, Peter."

"I thought we had a pretty good thing going."

"Better for you than for me, I think."

"If it's the junk, I'll try to lay off it."

"You've tried before, Peter," she said with a sigh. "If you really want to kick the habit, you need medical help."

He stared off for a few minutes, then shook his head. "At least drive the car back and I'll ride the motorcycle. I can't handle both of them."

"That's your problem," Jennifer said.

Michael was telling Captain Segar what little they knew about the killing as Segar studied the knife and the bloodstains in the kitchen. Peter, looking dark, got up and went into the bathroom. Jennifer feared he might shoot up while he was in there, but he returned after a minute and sat back down next to her. She sighed. Perhaps she was being unreasonable. She had stolen his motorcycle, after all, and it was her responsibility to help him get it back. After that, she could decide what to do next.

Finally she went over to Michael to tell him her decision.

"Wait a bit," he said after hearing her out. "Stay for the funeral. Peter can stay, too. You needn't decide anything yet."

"When will that be?"

"The ceremonies will start tomorrow."

"I'll talk to him," Jennifer said, and went back to Peter. She told him what Michael had proposed and he listened in silence.

"Will you stay?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I have to get the car back. I'll take the motorcycle

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and see if I can find a hitch for towing it. There's probably not much chance of that around here, though."

Feeling guilty again, she turned away, wondering what to do next.

"I want everyone to sit down," Michael was saying. "I have something to tell you about the murder of King Carranza. I wanted to wait until later, but I can see there may be no time to wait."

"What is there to say?" Segar wanted to know. "The king himself saved us the trouble and expense of a trial with his throwing knife."

"But you see," Michael said, "of all the people in the village at the time of King Carranza's death, this German youth, Hans Funken, is the one person who could *not* have murdered him."

It was Maria Fetesti who spoke first. "Are you saying that one of us killed him? That's impossible!"

"Consider the evidence," Michael said. "It's plain to see that Hans Funken entered this house to rob Carranza. Perhaps he peered through the window and saw him in a wheelchair and considered him an easy victim. After searching the downstairs, he was in the kitchen near the back door when the king managed to pull out his knife and hurl it at him. Funken was hit in the side but pulled the knife free of the wound and let it drop to the floor. Then what happened?"

"He went back to the living room and beat Carranza to death with the blacksmith's hammer," Ivan Raski said.

"No," Michael told him. "Because there's not a trace of blood on the floor or rug between the kitchen and the living room. I looked very carefully. And once the knife was removed, the wound bled freely. There were drops of blood on the back steps and Steven's dogs were able to follow the trail all the way through the trees to the road."

"All right," Raski agreed. "Then he must have bludgeoned the king *before* he received the knife wound."

"Equally impossible. The wounds with that hammer would have been fatal almost instantly. Even if King Carranza could have lifted himself from the floor with his dying breath he could hardly have thrown that knife through the hall and into the kitchen with such accuracy. Carranza couldn't have killed Funken after he was bludgeoned and Funken couldn't have killed Carrranza after he was knifed—the two attacks couldn't even have happened simultaneously because they were too far away from each other."

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"Then who did kill my brother?" Theresa asked, coming out of her silence.

"There are two possibilities," Michael said gently. "One is that someone from this village entered the house after the robbery and killed the king, assuming it would be blamed on the thief. The other possibility is that two thieves took part in the robbery and Funken's accomplice killed Carranza after the king threw his knife. Again, let us examine the evidence. Which way did the mortally wounded Funken head after he fled from the house? Toward the road beyond the trees. Certainly that suggests a car was waiting there. But we found no car. Nor did we find most of the gold jewelry and coins you told us are missing from the house.

"There can be little doubt it was an accomplice who murdered Carranza and then helped the dying Funken through the woods and back to his car. He left the body by the road, took the loot from the robbery, and fled in that car."

"Where do we find this accomplice?" Segar asked.

"Here," Michael said, pointing an accusing finger. "Peter Fry killed our king."

Peter made a grab for Jennifer—perhaps to take her with him or to use her as a shield, she was never sure which—but then Steven Fetesti and Ivan Raski were on top of him, pulling him to the floor.

Michael said, "He knew where the bathroom was. He stepped into a strange house in a foreign land and walked directly to the bathroom without asking anyone where it was, or if one even existed. Only two houses in the entire village have indoor bathrooms. One might argue that a young man from America, where indoor plumbing is common, might simply assume we all have it, too. But for him to approach the bathroom here with such assurance he had to have been in this house before. The door was closed. I'd opened it earlier to check inside and then closed it again."

Later, as the clans began to arrive for the funeral of the Gypsy king, Jennifer stood alone in front of Michael's house. When he came out to join her, she asked, "What will become of me, Michael?"

"You will go back to Bucharest after the funeral. I've already arranged for Captain Segar to take you. He will get you a flight back home. Peter Fry will be staying here for a long time."

"You can keep the motorcycle. I won't need it now."

"Neither will Peter. Segar found the jewelry and coins hidden in his car. Or I should say, Funken's car. Segar confirmed that it had

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German license plates. Peter must have encountered Segar's official car on the road after the murder and decided it would be less suspicious to stop and ask about you. When Segar brought him along, he probably didn't realize until too late that he was returning to the murder scene. I suppose the two of them were searching for you, following your trail, when they happened upon this village and decided on a robbery for drug money."

"I brought all this on you and your people," Jennifer said.

"King Carranza lived a long life," Michael told the lost girl as a cheer went up. Another Gypsy clan had arrived for the funeral.

"Q"

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15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ _____
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(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months = $144.00 x .85 = $122.40)

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

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FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____

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PHONE: _____ **DATE:** _____

YOUR SIGNATURE _____

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

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HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York, 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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ROBERT BARNARD (about a good deed)

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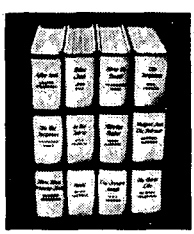

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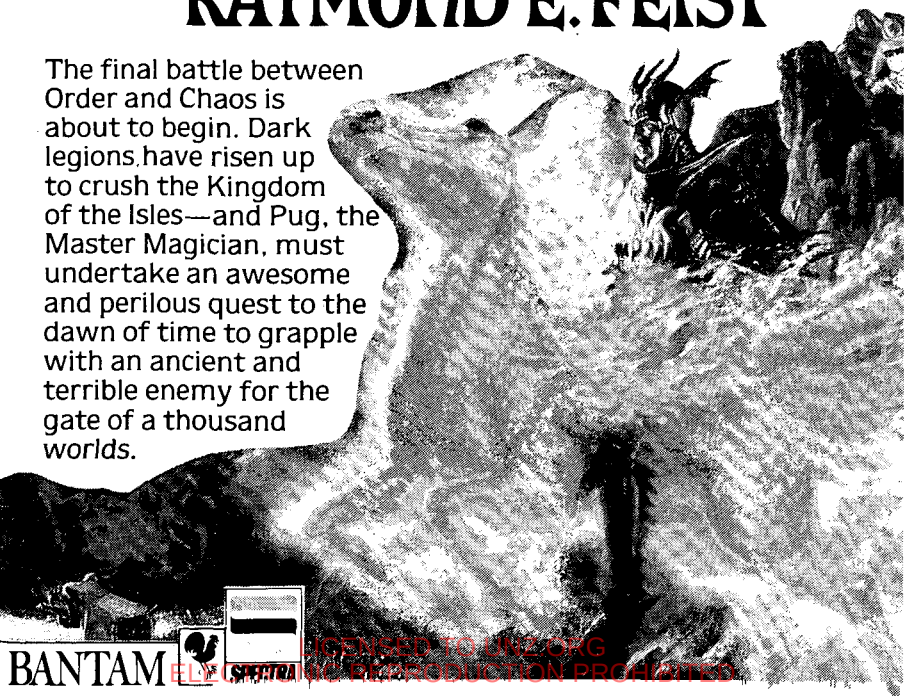

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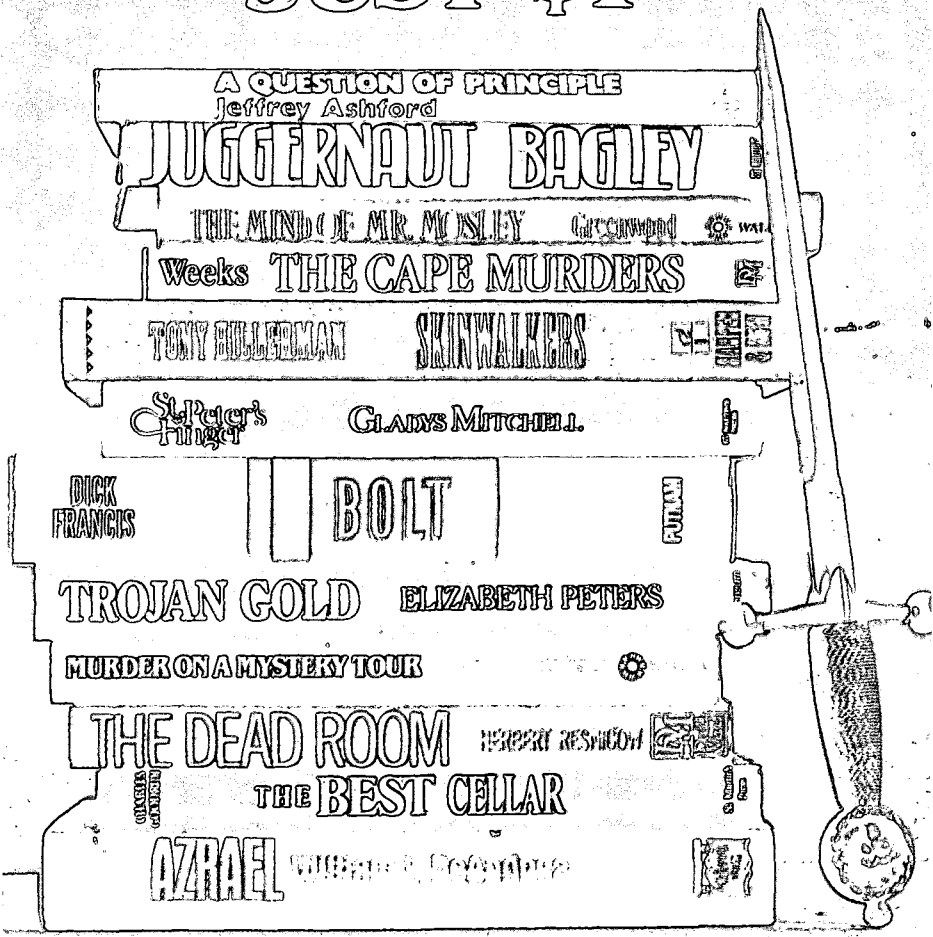

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